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**‘TRIPPING DAINILY INTO THE ARENA’¹:
A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH WOMEN’S ATHLETICS 1921-1960.**

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degree of Ph.D. in Social History
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¹ Daily Mirror, 5 Aug. 1924.

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SUMMARY

Sport has been the subject of an increasing amount of academic work in recent years but few texts cover women in any great depth. The history of their participation in the twentieth century, the obstacles they faced, and the support they received, needs to be studied in detail. This thesis addresses these questions, and contributes to the small but growing body of literature that places sporting women at the centre of research. It is a unique piece of work, which is solely concerned with the social history of women's athletics in England, from the establishment of the sport in 1921 until 1960.

It is a common perception that few women were active in physical sports in the early twentieth century. However, this research has shown that that is an incorrect view. While there were not so many women involved as men, women's athletics was a thriving sport and one that was quickly established. It will be also be argued that there was greater male support than has previously been accepted. Nevertheless, opposition remained a powerful influence, and evidence of this will be presented throughout this thesis.

The research has centred on the minutes of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association. Area association records were studied, as were some from individual athletic clubs and various committees that the WAAA was represented on. These are all resources that have not been previously analysed in detail, or indeed in some cases at all. Oral interviews provided information about club life, competition, and why certain individuals became involved in the sport. The resources have enabled an in-depth study of both the domestic side of the sport and English women's participation at international level.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Amateur Athletic Association
AAU	Amateur Athletic Union
AC	Athletic Club
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AW	<u>Athletics Weekly</u>
ATSB	Arbeiter Turn-und Sportbund
BAAB	British Amateur Athletic Board
BHLS	Birchfield Harriers Ladies' Section
FSFI	Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale
FSFSF	Fédération des Societies Féminines de France
IAAF	International Amateur Athletic Federation
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IVAB	Inter-Varsity Athletic Board
LAC	Ladies Athletic Club
LOAC	London Olympiades Athletic Club
LSAA	London Schools Athletic Association
MCWAAA	Midland Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association
NCAL	National Centre for Athletics Literature
NCWAAA	Northern Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association
SAA	Schools Athletic Association

SCWAAA	Southern Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association
UAU	University Athletic Union
WAAA	Women's Amateur Athletic Association
WDNAAF	Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation

INTRODUCTION

Sport has been the subject of a significant amount of journalistic and academic literature in recent years but few people have chosen to place women at the centre of their research. Very little has been written about the history of women's sports, with the result that the image that is so often presented as the *British* experience of sport is actually that of young men. These accounts maintain the idea that sport was an entirely male preserve, in which women had no active role to play. Consequently, it is assumed that they have no story to be told. For example, Richard Holt justified the lack of information provided about women in his book Sport and the British, by saying that the

history of sport in modern Britain is the history of men ... this is not from any unwillingness to give them (women) their due but because sport has been so thoroughly identified with masculinity ... moreover segregated female sport has itself been a frail and pallid growth in the shade of men's sport...¹

It would be wrong, however, to assume that just because women's experiences have not been recorded there is no story to be discovered. Women's history in general has been neglected until recently and this has been particularly apparent in the masculine-dominated world of sport. Surely, it is not possible to make claims about the lack of women's sport until detailed histories have been written.

In recent years this unbalanced account of sport has begun to be remedied and has indeed revealed far more female activity than was previously supposed. Guttmann's assertion that 'there has never been a time when girls and women were

Please note that all works cited are published in London unless otherwise indicated.

¹ Sport and the British. A Modern History (Oxford, 1990), p. 8.

wholly excluded from sports', is more than sufficiently supported by evidence provided in his wide-ranging book Women's Sports. A History (1991). Two other texts that solely concentrate on women's experiences are Jennifer Hargreaves's Female Sports. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994) and Susan Cahn's Coming On Strong (1994). Hargreaves writes from a British perspective and, therefore, the content is more pertinent to this thesis than Cahn's text, which concentrates on the North American experience. Coming on Strong should not be ignored, however, as it provides many interesting and comparative points. The fact that women have been so marginalised in sport and presented as having participated so rarely, has largely been a result of researcher's ignorance and their lack of interest.

This work contributes to the growing body of literature on women's physical activities. It was initially planned to include an introductory section on women's physical activities before the twentieth century, but this has proved impossible. Restrictions on space and the desire to concentrate on new material took precedence over a review of the relevant literature. Suffice to say that in addition to the work of Allen Guttmann and Jennifer Hargreaves, there have been several excellent texts on the introduction of physical activities into girls' schools and colleges in the nineteenth century. In particular, attention is drawn to Kathleen McCrone, Sport and The Physical Emancipation of Women 1870-1914 (1988), and Sheila Fletcher, Women First: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education, 1880-1980 (1984). In addition to tracing the emergence of women's physical activity in this period, they highlight the role of the medical establishment in perpetuating the myths surrounding women's physical abilities. The idea that women only had a certain amount of energy and, therefore, were not suited to physical activity, was remarkably resistant to challenge and continued to influence opinions in the twentieth century.

While this thesis concentrates solely on women's athletics, the themes identified will enable those interested in other sports to make comparisons. Perhaps more importantly, it may encourage further research into the history of women's

participation in competitive sports. Athletics has been one of the most successful sports for women in Britain, yet there is no text that adequately celebrates the triumphs or even tells the story. What does exist mostly takes the form of brief autobiographies and biographies of medal winners at the major championships.²

Athletics has been central to my life ever since I became an active athlete at the age of eleven. My own experiences were remarkably similar to the women who were interviewed for this thesis. Like them, it was by chance rather because of any national scheme to identify interested youngsters, that I found I had an aptitude for it. In 1981 I was chosen to run in a cross country at school, purely on the basis that my elder sister was a regular winner of the event. Fortunately, not only did I run well but also enjoyed the experience. Later in the season, after having run for the Coventry schools team, I was introduced to my local athletics club, Coventry Godiva Harriers. Here I was very fortunate to find an excellent coach, a fact that is so important for success but has always been a matter of luck in British athletics. In the first few years I trained regularly because of the friends I made and the fun I had, rather than any burning desire to be the best. Unlike the inter-war years, when women started in the sport at about sixteen, I was one of very few young women who remained in athletics throughout my teenage years. Subsequent international selections, the financial and

² Attention is drawn to the following examples of autobiographies and bibliographies of British female athletes: D. Hyman, Sprint to Fame (1964), D. Emery, Lillian (1971), M. Peters (with Ian Wooldridge), Mary P: autobiography (1974), M. Rand, Mary Mary (1969), T. Sanderson (with L. Hickman), Tessa: my life in athletics (1986), F.A. Whitbread, Fatima: the autobiography of Fatima Whitbread (1988), A. Blue, Queen of the Track. The Liz McColgan Story (1992), S. Gunnell and Christopher Priest, Running Tall (1994).

Readers may also be interested in the following references, G. Schoor, Babe Didrikson: the world's greatest woman athlete (New York, 1978), B.D. Zaharias, This life I've led: autobiography as told to Harry Paxton (1956), B. Cuthbert, Golden Girl: as told to Jim Webster (1966), O. Connolly, The rings of destiny (New York, 1968), C. Henkel, Mary Decker, America's Nike (Chicago, 1984).

emotional support of my family, and the excitement of travelling abroad kept my interest alive. Despite injuries and the difficulties of juggling training and studying, I have remained a dedicated athlete. In 1993, the year I began work on this thesis, I became World Student 1500 Metres Champion.

My interest in athletics widened from one of simply taking part, to a desire to know about the history of my sport. It grew increasingly frustrating to discover that so little had been written on the history of British women's athletics. In Melvin Watman's, History of British Athletics (1968), women's athletics is limited to a single chapter. In 1965, Peter Pozzoli published British Women's Athletics 1921-1964. However, apart from a brief introduction it consisted entirely of statistic information, tracing the development of each event by recording the best performances each year. Twenty years later, Eric Cowe published International Women's Athletics 1890-1940: A Statistical History. As the name suggests, this was also a record of the improving standards in women's athletics.³ Several texts have been published on the history of the Amateur Athletic Association,⁴ but none on the Women's Amateur Athletic Association. The need for a history of women's athletics was given added impetus by the creation of a British Athletic Federation in 1991. This meant the demise of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, with the result that women were no longer in control of their side of the sport. The death of Marea Hartman in 1994, who had been the personification of the women's association since the fifties, was a real ending of an era.

The following chapters cover the emergence of women's athletics in England, from the beginning of official competition in 1921 until the 1960's. Although the aim

³ P. Pozzoli, British Women's Athletics, 1921-1964 (1965), E. Cowe, International Women's Athletics 1890-1940: A Statistical History (Bingley, 1985).

⁴ H. Abrahams, Fifty Years of Amateur Athletic Association Championships (1961), AAA, Fifty Years of Progress, 1880-1930: The Jubilee Souvenir of the Amateur Athletic Association (1930), P. Lovesey, The Official Centenary History of The Amateur Athletic Association (Enfield, 1979).

was originally to cover Britain, rather than simply England, this proved impossible. It was decided that it would be as offensive to readers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to call this study 'British', as it is to discover that the history of athletics usually means the history of men's athletics. It should be noted, however, that many international teams were called British rather than English. Although a far higher proportion of team members were English, some Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish women did represent the United Kingdom. The time-span was chosen in order to focus on the initial period of the emergence of women's athletics. English women led the world for the first six years of their involvement in international matches and, while this needs to be recognised, so do the reasons for their decline in fortune. National and international standards continued to rise despite the Second World War robbing many women of potentially their best years. The growing irrefutable proof that women could safely participate in all athletic events, led to the breakdown of the medical myths which had successfully limited their participation in the sport. Nevertheless, the belief that physical activity could harm women was surprisingly persistent and slow to disappear.

My search for information was not helped by the fact that access was not gained to some important sources, notably the minutes of the Southern Women's Amateur Athletic Association. In addition, the majority of papers referring to the Northern Women's Amateur Athletic Association appear to be missing from the National Centre for Athletic Literature in Birmingham. I was, however, fortunate to have unlimited access to the records of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, thanks to the late Dame Marea Hartman who also gave me a long and informative interview. She was very encouraging and had a great desire to see the completion of a history of women's athletics in England. It was therefore a great shame that she died while this research was in progress. The Midland Women's Amateur Athletic Association also provided a significant amount of help. In addition to several individuals granting me an interview, I was allowed access to the available committee minutes.

The amateur and voluntary nature of athletics has meant that few clubs or women's associations have had permanent offices, where minutes can be securely kept. Consequently, many records dating from the early period in particular have been lost. However, I have been able to discover a significant amount about Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section and London Olympiades Athletic Club. Wilf Morgan, who has written a history of Birchfield Harriers, provided some club minutes as well as putting me in touch with several ex-members who were subsequently interviewed. Close to the end of the research, Dave Terry identified and made copies of all the available minutes of London Olympiades, and was good enough to forward them to me. Together with contemporary newspapers and specialist magazines these sources have provided the vast bulk of the material presented in this thesis.

The written evidence has been supplemented where appropriate by the memories of women involved in the sport as athletes, coaches, officials and administrators. Their testimonies help to bring the sport alive and contribute to a better understanding of international, national and grass roots participation. Their recollections show that the main reasons that women became involved, have always been the fun they have and satisfaction they gain from participation. It is worth noting, however, that the sport has significantly changed since the years when the women who have contributed here were competing. As the respondents noted, the money now available in the sport means there are real earning prospects, albeit only for an elite minority. Athletics is now regularly shown on television, is the recipient of several lucrative sponsorship deals and is undoubtedly part of the British sports industry. It is salutary, therefore, to recall the women who are usually ignored, to remember how past female athletes experienced the sport, and to mark the work of the pioneers.

Chapter one of this thesis introduces women's athletics in Britain from the perspective of national and regional organisation. It assesses how quickly and professionally the sport was established. The second chapter develops some of the points already raised, with particular reference to how clubs operated. Clubs have

always been crucial to the sport's survival, providing the vast majority of athletes with a base, competition, training advice and free coaching. The administrative role that clubs played in women's athletics is discussed, as is the amount of competition offered. Chapters three and four move on to international competition, the first covering the years up to the Second World War and the second those between 1939 and 1960. Rather than just listing the various international matches in chronological order, the development of elite athletics for women is looked at with reference to the support and opposition they faced. In addition, the role that the Women's Amateur Athletic Association played in international affairs is also discussed. Finally, chapter five traces the changing image of the female athlete. This is not simply a portrayal of how their dress and appearance altered, but is also a discussion of changed medical opinions about the participation of women in athletics and the response that their involvement provoked in the national press.

This work is not an attempt to romanticise women's involvement in athletics. Neither will it be claimed that as many women were involved as men, nor that their participation held as much interest for the general public. What it does do is record the establishment of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association, the achievements of both athletes and administrators, and the level of support they enjoyed. The struggle women faced in order to achieve recognition as athletes and the opposition to their increased participation will also be explored. The continuities between the sport today at grass roots level and in the past are evident, as are the obvious differences that exist at the elite level.

Chapter One

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL ORGANISATION

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the establishment of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association (WAAA), which was responsible for women's activities in England until 1991. In addition to the national governing body, there were area associations and county associations which co-ordinated athletics at a local level. The WAAA had ultimate authority and oversaw athletics, whether it was offered by an athletics club, business house, school, or university. Unlike in most other countries, men's and women's athletics remained separately administered in England and the reasons why this situation developed will be looked at in this chapter. The reaction of the men's AAA to the creation of the women's organisation, as well as the degree of support that was offered by some men will be revealed.

The problems facing the organisation after the Second World War will then be traced. Everyone in Britain of course suffered financial hardship and athletics, by no means affluent before the war, was no exception. Although one cannot doubt that the WAAA always felt they were working for the benefit of female athletes, criticism was increasingly levelled at them. The last part of the chapter will cover the major developments in the administration of women's athletics that occurred during the fifties.

Contrary to the usual pattern of development, the WAAA was established *after* the first British women were involved in an international meeting. As we shall see in chapter three, Britain did not pioneer women's track and field. Several other European countries had already begun to organise women's athletic clubs and both domestic and small international matches had taken place. Before the WAAA was established, women athletes from England had competed in Monte Carlo and Brussels in both 1921 and 1922. In addition, they were victorious at the inaugural Women's Olympic Games, held in Paris in 1922.

Vera Searle, who was one of the first members of the WAAA and an international athlete in 1923, claimed that requests for female athletes from England to compete in meetings held on the continent were frequently sent to the men's Amateur Athletic Association (AAA). However, it was not until 1921 that they were acted upon. There is no written evidence to support these claims, but it would not be surprising if countries like France and Belgium, which were already organising women's athletic events, had attempted to interest a nation that was felt to be the leading country in men's sport.¹

It was early in 1922 when the question of women's races appeared in the Amateur Athletic Association minutes for the first time. The AAA received a letter enquiring about the possibility of women's races and 'the control thereof.' The minutes of the men's association indicate that they 'approved in principle and the committee expressed the opinion that it would be advisable that an Athletic Association for women should be formed and application made to the AAA for affiliation.'² Their agreement to a women's association was welcomed as it

was thought to be an urgent necessity, and (because) at the suggestion of the AAAs women's events had been promoted for some years by men's clubs at their meetings, and universities had held women's sports for several seasons, but it was felt that all these uncorrelated athletic energies should be combined and standardized. This is the chief object of the association ...³

¹ Interview with Vera Searle (née Palmer), 27 Sept. 1993.

² AAA General Committee, 15 Feb. 1922. It is also reported in the Sporting Life, 16 Feb. 1922. Unfortunately, neither source indicates whom the letter was from. One would assume that it came from people interested in setting up a WAAA, possibly a group led by Joe Palmer and/or the athletes who had competed in Monte Carlo.

³ The Times, 2 Aug. 1923.

Quite why the AAA suggested that the application should be submitted is unclear. At the AAA General Committee meeting on 14 October 1922, the WAAA application for affiliation was refused. The men's association replied that, 'if the Association was properly formed, the AAA would be prepared to enter into a working agreement.' Lovesey has argued that the original idea was for the WAAA to 'function within the AAA, as the Race Walking Association or the English Cross Country Union do'. Thus, women's athletics would have been another Section within the men's association. Why the AAA changed their minds was not recorded in their committee minutes and their reasoning can only be guessed at. Lovesey concluded that

*whether male chauvinists won the day, or the AAA simply took fright at controlling what was regarded in some quarters as at best *risqué* and at worst dangerous to health, the WAAA went it's own way, and the working agreement took ten years to emerge.*⁴

The original impetus for a WAAA in England seems to have resulted from the participation of a Regent Street Polytechnic team in Monte Carlo, in 1921. Following the close of the competition, the French woman Madame Milliat, who was responsible for the development of much of women's sport in her own country, wrote to Major Warsech of Regent Street Polytechnic, inquiring if he could help form an English Athletic Association. This would then be able to affiliate to the newly established Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale (FSFI),⁵ which was the international governing body of women's athletics. As Major Warsech had no knowledge about athletics he contacted Major Marchant, who had helped Joe Palmer

⁴ P. Lovesey, The Official Centenary History of the AAA (1979), p. 66.

⁵ The WAAA affiliated to the FSFI in 1923. See WAAA summary file 1921-1926.

train the women's team for Monte Carlo in 1921. It is clear that Major Marchant was intimately involved with the establishment of the English women's association and, although he left the WAAA Executive Committee in 1929, he continued to represent them on the FSFI.⁶ Who actually proposed the formation of a women's association is open to debate. WAAA papers indicate that the driving force was Joe Palmer and Major Marchant. In 1929, the WAAA wrote that it was Marchant who had 'started the Association and had the work of getting (it) all together, and very great credit is given him for his initial efforts'.⁷ However, comments written by them in 1972 state that one of the pioneering athletes who competed in Monte Carlo was in fact behind the suggestion:

A proposal by Florence Birchenough (now Mrs Millachap and here tonight), led to the formation of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association.

Athletic competition among women had long been frowned upon by male participants but following a visit to Monte Carlo in 1921 by a team of girls from the Regent Street Polytechnic, London, to which Florence belonged, she considered moves should be made to form an official body for women's athletics.⁸

While there is confusion over the beginnings of the WAAA, it was clear that the establishment of the association in 1922 was welcomed. The Sporting Life wrote that

⁶ WAAA AGM minutes, 26 Jan. 1929.

⁷ WAAA AGM minutes, 26 Jan. 1929.

⁸ 'How it all began ...' This was the foreword, written on the menu card provided for the WAAA Golden Jubilee Dinner on 30 Nov. 1972, at the Goldsmith's Hall.

in view of the increasing interest now being taken in sport by our girls the announcement recently made by the AAA to the effect that they are agreeable to the forming of a Women's Athletic Association has given general satisfaction.

Major W. B. Marchant of the Polytechnic, Regent St has the matter in hand, and will be glad to hear from anyone interested. A meeting will be held as soon as possible, when it is hoped that the Association will become an accomplished fact, and application will be made to the AAA for affiliation as soon as possible.⁹

During the first meeting it was decided that Major Marchant should contact people who were likely to be interested in supporting a WAAA. This he duly did, discussing the matter with Mr Knowles of Kensington Athletic Club and Joe Palmer.¹⁰ A second meeting between the three men was held after Mr Palmer had met with 'likely Associations and Institutes', which it was hoped would provide support for women's athletics. Unfortunately, no details are available except that Palmer's report was 'considered quite favourable'. The immediate outcome was that another meeting was called to establish a committee and plans were drawn up to formally create the association. Two athletes, Sophie Elliott-Lynn, who competed for Kensington, and Florence Birchenough, who competed for The Polytechnic Institute, were co-opted. Major Marchant was established as acting chairman while Mr Knowles and Elliott-Lynn agreed to undertake clerical duties.¹¹

⁹ 4 Mar. 1922.

¹⁰ See chapter two for more on this.

¹¹ WAAA summary 1921-1926. See also F.A.M. Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women. History, Development and Training (1930), pp. 34 -35.

In his book History of British Athletics, Melvyn Watman interprets the AAA's decision that women's athletics 'should be governed by a separate body' as meaning that 'it wanted no part of an activity that many members found to be unfeminine.'¹² The WAAA summary of this period merely states that the AAA contacted them during 1922 with the information that 'they were unable to co-operate.' Despite this, the AAA continued to discuss possibilities for a 'working agreement' and appeared to be under the impression that they held some power as far as the control of female athletics was concerned. In March 1923, the General Committee held 'considerable discussion' about the 'proposed agreement with the WAAA'. It was finally decided that clubs affiliated to the AAA need not apply to the WAAA for a permit in order to hold a women's open race. However, the same did not apply to women's clubs which affiliated to the WAAA. These clubs had to obtain a permit and pay a fee of 10/6 (52½p) if they wished to organise a men's open race that had a prize of over 20/- (£1.00) in value. The following September, the same committee ruled that a woman could not enter any open athletic competition held under AAA rules.¹³ The WAAA was finally recognised as the sole organisation responsible for women's athletics in Britain in 1926. The VIIIth IAAF International Congress of that year, decided that 'as a WAAA was already in existence the control of women's sports be delegated to that body.'¹⁴ The AAA appears to have accepted this decision.¹⁵

¹² M. Watman, History of British Athletics (1968), pp. 228-229.

¹³ AAA General Committee, 3 Mar. 1923, 28 Sept. 1923 and 1 Mar. 1924.

¹⁴ AAA General Committee, 25 Sept. 1926.

¹⁵ The AAA Jubilee Souvenir text, notes that in 1926 'control of women's athletics was left to the Women's AAA'. One line hardly seems sufficient to mark this crucial moment in the development of women's athletics in Britain. See H. Pash, Fifty Years of Progress 1850-1930, AAA Jubilee Souvenir (1930), p. 54.

The possibility of a working agreement between the two associations continued to be discussed in the AAA minutes during the early thirties. The men's committee was obviously uncomfortable with the idea. In May 1931, the 'advisability of entering into a working agreement with the WAAA' was deferred, while the men's area associations considered their responses. The question was on the agenda again in October but a decision was deferred still further, this time until the following month's meeting. During November's committee Bill Pepper proposed a positive resolution. However, the AAA committee was not about to rush into any decision and appointed a sub-committee to 'consider the whole question.' Two members from each of the men's area associations were nominated, including Mr Pepper who represented the South.¹⁶ The following year saw the AAA finally alter their rules, in what would appear to be a belated, official recognition that the WAAA was responsible for women's races in Britain. The AAA committee concluded that if a women's event was to be staged, in any sports meeting, a permit should be obtained from the WAAA rather than the AAA. Furthermore, they decided that officials for women's events should be arranged by the body promoting those competitions. In practical terms, this gave the WAAA more control over women's events. The separate nature of the two associations was further emphasised by the AAA, when it voted in October 1933 not to allow women to become honorary members.¹⁷

Following the AAA's decision to refuse their affiliation, the WAAA was firmly established as a separate governing body, solely responsible for the development of the women's sport in Britain. Present at the early meetings were Mrs Elliott-Lynn, Mr M. Jones and Mr E. H. Knowles of Kensington AC, Miss M Lines, Miss F. Birchenough and Joe Palmer, all from London Olympiades AC, Major W. B. Marchant from Regent Street Polytechnic, Capt. Saveall of London Borough Harriers, and Mr R. Churchill representing the AAA. Major Marchant filled the role of both

¹⁶ AAA General Committee, 21 Nov. 1931.

¹⁷ AAA General Committee, 20 Feb. 1932 and 21 Oct. 1933.

president and chairman, while Sophie Elliott-Lynn agreed to be honorary secretary and treasurer.¹⁸ Unlike the men's AAA, the women's association was run on a voluntary basis,¹⁹ a fact of which some members were very proud:

we're all 100 percent voluntary. We haven't got a single paid official in the WAAA and that's something to boast about. Up and down the country, the work is done in our own homes, in our own time and no one else can boast that ... My point of view is that you work far harder at an honorary job than you do for the job you are paid at from nine to five ... it is a challenge ... You're honour bound to make a go of it and that's why we sit up all hours.²⁰

Several rules were established at the inaugural meeting, as was a formal agreement that their title would be the Women's Amateur Athletic Association. The minimum age of participation in track and field was set at seventeen, although this was reduced to fifteen in 1924. The rules for the association were based on those of the AAA where possible. The accepted kit for athletes was also designated and was clearly designed to ensure modesty.²¹ Early in 1923, it was decided to hold championships on an annual basis and, in 1928, to allow 'Colonials and others now in England to compete.'²² Gaining publicity for the championships was crucial for the development of the sport and, in 1928, handbills advertising the championships were

¹⁸ WAAA files, 'Inaugural Meeting of the WAAA', contained in the WAAA summary 1921-1926.

¹⁹ It should be noted that in 1928, a paid clerical assistant was employed by the WAAA. Miss Phyllis Cosson was paid £20 per annum as a honorarium and given a typewriter.

²⁰ Interview by Joyce Sherlock, De Montford University, with Vera Searle, 1987. Ms Sherlock kindly loaned a video recording of the interview to Lynne Robinson. Information was also taken from Robinson's own interview with Vera Searle.

²¹ See chapter five for more detail on this.

²² Undated summary of WAAA 1921-1926. See also WAAA committee meeting, 16 Jul. 1928.

distributed by WAAA committee members, who stood outside Stamford Bridge gates during a AAA meeting. 'All physical instructresses' were sent a ticket to watch, presumably in the hope that they would encourage what they saw in their schools. In addition, all clubs were told of the championships and their president provided with a complimentary ticket.²³

The aims and objectives of the newly constituted WAAA covered a mixture of administration, ideological and paternalistic issues:

- The co-ordination and control of women's athletics in England.
- The ensurance that women should compete only in suitable surroundings and desirable conditions.
- The registration of duly authenticated national records.
- The giving of advice as to the choice of suitable events for competition and also as to training.
- The improvement of the physique of the nation.
- To prevent the exploitation of women's athletics for advertisement and money making.
- To foster the true amateur spirit.²⁴

²³ WAAA committee minutes, 16 Jul. 1928.

²⁴ Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women and Girls, pp. 33-34. A copy of the rules was found in the WAAA files and was also printed in The Times, 2 Aug. 1923.

Protection of female athletes was clearly a central concern and it can be discerned in more than one of the association's rules. The WAAA considered that their main aim was to bring the youngsters successfully through the ranks, and to protect them.²⁵ Marea Hartman, who was a long-term official, agreed, and recalled the role of the WAAA at early meetings:

... what the WAAA did do was to make sure that the women had proper dressing room accommodation and that they weren't exploited, because we had a lot of keen fathers and a lot of bookmakers who would have done all sort of things with women's athletics in those early days.²⁶

As late as 1956, the *midland* secretary, Mrs Nelson-Neal, argued that the WAAA rule preventing use of an athlete's name or photograph for publicity should be retained. She felt it was 'still very necessary to prevent young athletes being foolish with irresponsible press photographers, who even at the White City track tried to get girls to do stunts after winning a title'.²⁷ In order to protect athletes against what was considered to be a health risk, the 'more trying events', for example tug-of-war, were banned by the WAAA. In addition, the rules established that 'a coat or wrap shall be worn between events' in order for athletes to keep warm.²⁸

Particularly in the first years that women were participating in organised athletics, the WAAA was very conscious of the contemporary debate about the effect of sports on female athletes. The association was always careful not to be seen as putting their athletes at physical risk, and experimental races were carried out before

²⁵ Interview with Marea Hartman, 13 May 1993.

²⁶ Interview with Vera Searle.

²⁷ WAAA AGM minutes, 8 Dec. 1956.

²⁸ The Times, 2 Aug. 1923.

new events or distances were accepted by the WAAA. In order to establish the programme of events at their championships, a commission was established by the WAAA in 1923. The members had to decide whether the pole vault and hop-step and jump, (now called triple jump), should be included. The commission comprised two doctors and Mr Sam Mussabini, the coach of Polytechnic Harriers. They studied the attempts of Sophie Elliott-Lynn to participate in the events, and the effects they had upon her. Individual responses have not been discovered but, when the commission's report was produced at the subsequent WAAA meeting, it was 'carried unanimously that both events were entirely unfit for women and should not be allowed.'²⁹

In 1925, the first text specifically designed for female athletes was published. Although Athletics For Women And Girls. How To Be An Athlete And Why was not an official publication of the WAAA, it was written by their vice-president Sophie Elliott-Lynn. The foreword was by the Right Honourable Lord Desborough and the appreciation by Brigadier-General R. J. Kentish, both of whom were founding supporters of the association. The text included papers delivered by the author to the Pedagogic Conference of the Olympic Congress held at Prague, May 30 1925. These had been 'approved by the Congress' own Medical Sub-Commission'. The opinions of the people supporting women's athletics did not differ greatly from the general attitudes of the day. The WAAA, and indeed the FSFI, may have been pioneering a new activity for women, but the governing bodies were determined that any development would remain within accepted boundaries. The primary role of women was agreed to be motherhood, and this was not to be altered by the emerging sporting opportunities. Reflecting this view, Sophie Elliott-Lynn wrote that

I am an active athlete myself, as well as a publicist for women's athletics and I find that women are capable of roughly three quarters of what men are, without undue strain ... (women's) very heritage of

²⁹ Summary of the WAAA 1921-1926.

house-work and child bearing seems to indicate that they have these powers in a marked degree, but what we want to determine is the advisability of using up this energy or letting it lie dormant till required in the fulfilment of her function in life.³⁰

This was obviously influenced by the limited-energy school of thought that was influential during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The theory postulated that women only had a certain amount of available energy and in order to ensure that the race progressed healthily, energy depletion had to be guarded against.³¹ The WAAA supported the limiting of distances and the reduced weights of the throwing equipment. The furthest a woman could run was 1,000 metres.³² The association had originally stated that the half-mile would be the longest distance, but by 1925 it had agreed to the 1,000 metres, to fall in line with other European countries. In practice, however, the 800 metres or 880 yards was usually the longest track distance. Even this was too long for some members of the WAAA, including Elliott-Lynn. She felt that running 'in moderation (was) an ideal sport for women,' but that 300 yards should be the longest distance allowed until 'time has proved that damage is not done.' The FSFI recommended lighter throwing implements for women and their ruling became standard for female competitions. For instance, in the shot putt, the women threw an implement half the weight of the men's; 8lb compared with 16lb. Despite this caution, the throwing events were viewed by the sub-commission as being highly beneficial for women, as

³⁰ S. Elliott-Lynn, Athletics For Women And Girls. How To Be An Athlete and Why (1925), pp. 112-113.

³¹ K. McCrone, Sport and The Emancipation of Women 1870-1914 (1988), p. 104. J. Hargreaves, Sporting Females, Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994), p. 44.

³² In 1933, the WAAA did abolish their distance limit but this did not result in any new distances in practice.

the upward stretching movements employed in them are of great value, and ... the swaying and bending movements entailed especially by the throwing events are invaluable from the point of view of improvement of the intestinal circulation.³³

In addition, throwing the discus and shot putt was believed to aid the digestive system when the technique of turning in the circle was practised. The WAAA had gone further to ensure that the health and physical development of women was not impaired by their athletic participation. They had taken what was seen to be 'an important step in the right direction', by ruling that all throwing events should be by-manual. By this they meant that all competitors threw first with one hand and then the other, with the winning performance the best combined distance. The reasoning behind this, was that 'throwing alternatively with the left and right hands ... makes for equal development of the trunk.' It was also thought that muscular development in the arms would then be equal. According to one of the WAAA officials, although this method was seen to prevent 'lop-sided development,' it did lead to other problems:

I mean you can imagine a left handed discus on a wet day, I mean no wonder we couldn't get any judges for the women's field events because they never knew where the blooming things were going to land! All right for them to draw sectors and circles and one thing and another, the difficulty was to try to keep the implements inside those regions.³⁴

³³ Elliott-Lynn, Athletics For Women And Girls, p. 114-115.

³⁴ Interview with Vera Searle.

The role that the WAAA played in protecting the health of female athletes was again emphasized in Sophie Elliott-Lynn's address to the Pedagogic Olympic Conference. It was argued that girl athletes aged between fourteen and eighteen needed to exercise with particular care, in order to prevent long-term damage. The guidance and control of 'experts' was viewed as necessary to guard against 'over-strain'. One role of coaches, physiotherapists and doctors, was viewed by the WAAA to be to prevent women putting too much effort in to their training and competitions.³⁵ By stressing the importance of moderation, the WAAA felt it was succeeding in its rudimentary aim.

During the early years of female track and field, committees similar to the IAAF Medical Sub-Committee, were set up in England in order to determine what distances and events were suitable for women and girls. The WAAA was keen to monitor the effects of the events already being undertaken. This would not only set their own minds at rest but would provide evidence against those who still argued that the sport was not safe. The recollections of Vera Searle indicated just how important testing of athletes was in the policy of the association. Referring to the period from the 1920s until well into the 1960s, she commented that

when we wanted to put on a new event the WAAA used to experiment ... and we used to run experimental races with medical people in attendance, like we did when we started the young people on cross country. So that when we went to the International Congress, Miss Marea Hartman always had chapter and verse to quote, these medical things and official times and the state of the competitor ...³⁶

³⁵ This issue is discussed in more detail in chapter five.

³⁶ Interview with Vera Searle.

Experimental races were also organised by the area associations, who would then report their findings to the WAAA Development Committee. Once they had evidence that the event did not harm female athletes, the WAAA presented their findings to the International Congress, which had the power to introduce new events.³⁷ Marea Hartman, who was first treasurer and then secretary of the association, was concerned to push for higher hurdles. Although the IAAF agreed to two feet six, they refused to introduce three feet hurdles as the WAAA requested.³⁸ As is argued in detail during this thesis, there was persistent criticism about the advisability of athletics for women. Therefore, it was essential that the WAAA provided evidence that the sport was not harming those participating. Due mainly to the WAAA's policy of 'moderation', many doctors were supportive of women's involvement by 1925.³⁹

The first few seasons saw rapid developments as far as both the WAAA and women's athletics were concerned. Although the association did not have its own office, it was loaned one for a short time in High Holborn. Women like Vera Searle who were interested in participating in athletics found out, via newspaper advertisements, that they had to join a club before competing in WAAA promoted events. Vera recalled how she visited the office and Mrs Elliott-Lynn told her how to contact her nearest club.⁴⁰ Several more decisions on competition were established in the early twenties, including the introduction of handicap races. Two of the clubs represented at WAAA meetings, Manor Park Ladies and Kensington AC, proposed that handicap races should be allowed for women. This was carried and the AAA was asked to suggest a suitable handicapper for the women's association. Following their recommendation, Mr W. J. Pepper was confirmed as handicapper at the 1923 annual

³⁷ Interview with Vera Searle.

³⁸ Interview with Marea Hartman.

³⁹ Attention is drawn to the entire foreword in Elliott-Lynn, Athletics For Women And Girls.

⁴⁰ Interview by Joyce Sherlock with Vera Searle.

general meeting (AGM), a decision which was to have long-standing benefits for women's athletics as a whole.

Vera Searle, a long-time Executive member of the WAAA, agreed that the men's association felt the women 'would be better off on your own'. However, she acknowledged that contrary to popular opinion, some individual men gave the new association vital support:

the men didn't like it, our English AAA officials. I think they were terrified actually, they thought we'd get fierce and charge around the track and interfere with everybody. The AAA decided they couldn't possibly have a women's section but they would help the women form their own association... We used their rulebook, just changing him for her, and there were several gentlemen who served on the WAAA committee, to guide us until they died. Mr Bill Pepper, ... Mr Wadmore and there was a Bert Ives. They all belonged to big London clubs ...⁴¹

It all came about gradually and I don't suppose it would have come about at all if it hadn't been for the help from the men, because no one who was in that nucleus of women, who formed the thing, had any knowledge of how to run an athletic association.⁴²

It is worth recording here that there was far more help by individual men than has previously been allowed. The minutes of the Midland Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association (MCWAAA), record the support of many men including Charlie Lewis of Birmingham Atlanta Club, and Mr Bashford, who was a

⁴¹ Interview with Vera Searle.

⁴² Interview by Joyce Sherlock with Vera Searle.

member of the AAA. The helpful advice that male ex-athletes gave the association was recorded, as was their generosity in providing medals for events that required particular encouragement. Men were especially thanked for their support at walking races, where they not only provided advice but also officiated regularly at events.⁴³ There was a constant male presence within both the national and area associations responsible for women's athletics.

Both Bill Pepper and Harry Barclay were Executive members of the AAA as well as the WAAA, and proved to be useful allies. When Bill Pepper died in 1955, the women's association remembered him as 'one of the very few who visualised how great women's athletics would develop'. WAAA members recalled that 'it was, in fact, under his guidance that our Association was formed; we have lost a loyal friend and a wise and trusted counsellor'.⁴⁴ Pepper was president of the SCWAAA for twenty-one years, and was recognized as being instrumental in both the formation and expansion of the WAAA.⁴⁵ Harry Barclay was the AAA honorary secretary when he became a member of the WAAA Executive, during the 1926-1927 season. He was quickly voted in as president.⁴⁶ In 1930, he was awarded a Knighthood for his services to the AAA and the IAAF. At the same time, the British Olympic Association (BOA) praised him for his 'great sympathy and infinite understanding. Everyone knows how much the athletic movement owes to his kindly direction during

⁴³ MCWAAA committee minutes, Feb. 1938, Jan. 1943, and May 1946. The events in question were the jumps and throws. The offer was made 'in an endeavour to assist us to keep the interest in those events.' Mr Bashford's contribution is noted on many occasions but one early example is at the committee meeting of March 1942.

⁴⁴ See WAAA Executive Committee, 13 Oct. 1956, and WAAA minutes, 28 Jan 1956. See also 'William John ("Bill") Pepper - A Tribute, Athletics Weekly, 19 Nov. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 47, p. 19.

⁴⁵ WAAA AGM minutes, 28 Jan. 1956. He was also involved in the business house athletic movement.

⁴⁶ WAAA summary 1921-1926.

the years of his presidency of the WAAA.⁴⁷ As a member of the BOA, Barclay's support would have been welcomed by the WAAA. In 1925, the BOA decided that they would welcome 'the support of women in the furtherance of the Olympic movement', although they were less sure that they were ready to accept women 'nominating representatives'.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, in practice this is what happened. The WAAA chose athletes to fill the places allocated by the British Olympic Association and the BOA then approved their recommendations.

Before the war, the WAAA Executive Committee contained a large proportion of men. For example, the Executive of 1923-24 consisted of president, Lord Hawke, honorary secretary, Mr J. M. Thompson, who was a professional physiotherapist, honorary treasurer, Major W. B. Marchant, and honorary organising secretary, Mrs V. M. Cambridge. The committee also consisted of three international athletes, Misses Birchenough, Lines and Palmer (later Searle) and Mrs Goold, a personnel officer at Oxo, whose company provided sponsorship in the form of hot drinks after competitions and the use of their sports ground.⁴⁹ The remaining members were Messrs Knowles, Wadmore, Rainbow, Pepper, Warnet, Jones and Cossey. Although females increasingly led the WAAA, the initial help of men should not be ignored.

The size of the WAAA in the early twenties and the subsequent rate of growth have been hard to assess accurately. The WAAA files only contain a summary of the decisions made during the vital years of 1922-1925, as the original minutes

⁴⁷ British Olympic Journal, Jun. 1930, Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 6. Sir Harry Barclay was not only president of the WAAA during the twenties, but also a British Olympic Association and IAAF Council member. He was voted honorary secretary of the AAA in 1915 and vice-president of the AAA in 1925.

⁴⁸ BOA Council Meeting, 23 Jul. 1925.

⁴⁹ G. Pallett, Women's Athletics (Dulwich 1954), p. 115. See also WAAA files. It should be noted that Vera Searle (née Palmer) was no known relation of Joe Palmer.

have been lost. Despite this, it is possible to say that soon after the WAAA was formed the universities, business houses, and some factory clubs affiliated. In addition, several men's clubs established women's sections, and when these were all added to the new women's clubs it meant that 'within a short time the WAAA had several hundred clubs in affiliation.'⁵⁰ Sophie Elliott-Lynn, who was a vice-president of the WAAA from the 1920s, claimed that from having about twenty athletes in 1922, all of whom belonged to London Olympiades Athletic Club, the WAAA was responsible for over 25,000 girls and more than five hundred clubs by 1925.⁵¹ While this figure may be hard to believe, Elliott-Lynn was not alone in her estimation. The respected writer and coach of female athletes, George Pallett, wrote that 'the new body soon found itself looking after some 23,000 women athletes.'⁵²

There is no primary evidence available to support these figures but it is clear that the WAAA quickly established itself. In 1930, they reported that one hundred and thirty clubs were affiliated and seventy-five race permits had been issued for the summer season of May to September.⁵³ Both were seen as an indication of the growing popularity of women's athletics in Britain. Further evidence of this was provided in 1928, when the increased amount of activity by the association was felt to merit the use of chartered accountants for the first time and an assistant was taken on to help with the increasing amount of clerical work. The following year, an honorary solicitor agreed to give advice if required and it was decided to appoint trustees as the association now had 'many cups and a good deal of money'.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Webster, *Athletics of To-Day*, p. 34.

⁵¹ Elliott-Lynn, *Athletics For Women And Girls*, p. xi.

⁵² Pallett, *Women's Athletics* (1954), p. 115.

⁵³ WAAA AGM minutes, secretary's report, 1 Mar. 1930.

⁵⁴ WAAA committee minutes, 3 Dec. 1928, 6 Feb. 1928, and WAAA AGM minutes, 26 Jan. 1929.

The solicitor was a Mr Webb, who was an ex-athlete and recommended by Mr Barclay of the WAAA and AAA. Webb already carried out a similar role for the AAA.

The WAAA continued to grow in strength and, by March 1930 the midland (MCWAAA), northern (NCWAAA), and southern (SCWAAA) area associations had been formed. The first area association to be established was the Midland Counties WAAA in 1925. This would appear to be largely due to the international athlete Phyllis Hall, who was a member of Birmingham University and Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section. The earliest minutes appear to have been lost, but it is known that the MCWAAA was founded jointly by the University and Birchfield Athletic Club.⁵⁵ Hall had competed for England in the first Women's World Games and, it would not be surprising if she had returned to her club and encouraged the establishment of a similar body to the WAAA, which at this time also governed athletics in the South. Phyllis Hall became the first secretary of the Midland Counties WAAA and was later a president. She was also made a life vice-president although she was not closely involved for longer than a few years.

Another founding member of the MCWAAA was W. W. Alexander, who was the women's coach at both Birchfield Harriers and Birmingham University. By 1928, Hall and Alexander were in conflict with each other, and the national governing body was forced to propose 'an inaugural Meeting with some WAAA officials present and so make a fresh start'.⁵⁶ The national association organised the meeting in Birmingham and sent their honorary secretary. By 1930, however, the MCWAAA was described as 'a very flourishing branch of the Association (which was) to be very highly complimented on their year's work'.⁵⁷ Details of the dispute are not available,

⁵⁵ Athletics Weekly, May 1947, Vol. 3, No. 18, p. 19. MCWAAA committee minutes, 1 Aug. 1940.

When Mrs Nelson-Neal took over from Miss Phyllis Hall as secretary, only 'a few papers and no records had been handed to her'. In addition, this meeting decided that due to the war and the need to store papers safely that the secretary should destroy all papers and correspondence not considered necessary to the association files. During the war, it was noted that many records were lost due to bombing. It is easy to see why so little written evidence survives from the early years.

⁵⁶ WAAA committee minutes, 6 Feb. 1928.

⁵⁷ WAAA AGM minutes, 1 Mar. 1930.

but it would appear that Phyllis proposed a separate association for the Midlands, to be organised independently from the WAAA. Although the MCWAAA had been established in 1925, it does not appear that the WAAA rules were formally adopted until 1928.⁵⁸

Probably the most influential person in the history of the MCWAAA was Dorette Nelson-Neal. Nelson, as she was known, was another member of the famous Birmingham club, Birchfield Harriers (BHLS). This was the largest women's club in the Midlands and always had a large presence on the area association committees. Nelson-Neal was responsible for the MCWAAA for a very long time. The sport was fortunate that she was, on the whole, forward looking and prepared to bring in changes, rather than keeping the sport as it was when she herself was an active athlete. Nelson joined BHLS in the twenties, but her family did not welcome her involvement. Although it should be stressed that there is no written evidence, individuals who were involved in athletics, alongside Nelson, recalled that she arrived at the club in a chauffeured car and was clearly from a wealthy family. She chose to lose part of her inheritance in order remain involved in athletics. The dedication she subsequently showed was quite remarkable. The next chapter will illustrate her involvement in BHLS, but it should be noted here that she gave the same level of commitment to the MCWAAA. She was secretary from 1927 until just before her death in 1982. Describing her colleague, Winnie Haywood said that

(Nelson) gave her life to (athletics) ... she wouldn't give up. From the very beginning, from the time she was secretary of Birchfield Harriers, ... Nelson was really wrapped up in it and what Nelson didn't know about athletics wasn't worth knowing.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ WAAA committee minutes, 27 Feb. 1928. Unfortunately, there is no record of the subsequent meeting in either WAAA or MCWAAA records.

⁵⁹ Interview with Winnie Haywood, 9 May 1994.

In October 1928, 'the question came up that it was now time to form a Northern Counties WAAA'. As is discussed in chapter two, the universities led the way for women's athletics in the North. In 1928, Leeds University was acknowledged to be 'very progressive' and Manchester was chosen by the national governing body as a suitable site for the NCWAAA headquarters. However, the WAAA decided that it was not possible to include a northern team in a triangular match against the South and Midlands. The Northern Counties WAAA experienced many difficulties in establishing themselves, largely due to the size of their territory. In 1928 concern was expressed by the WAAA that people, not affiliated, were wrongly claiming that they represented the NCWAAA.⁶⁰ The teething problems were felt to be successfully sorting themselves out by 1930⁶¹ and, two years later twenty clubs and two county associations were affiliated.⁶²

It has proved impossible to gain access to the SCWAAA minutes and consequently, information on this area association is less detailed than it could be. The contemporary press was used and some additional knowledge has been gained from both MCWAAA and WAAA minutes. The WAAA was responsible for the Southern Counties Association until 1930, when it finally became a separate body. This probably accounted for the strong links between the SCWAAA and the WAAA. In 1929, it was announced that 'the General Committee (had given) the committee power to consider the advisability of forming a Southern Counties Association', and this was duly completed by 1930.⁶³

Any history of southern women's athletics must include a brief note on Marea Hartman and Vera Searle. Marea was single and although Vera was married, she lost her husband while she was relatively young. Both women gave considerable time and

⁶⁰ WAAA committee minutes, 4 Jun. 1928.

⁶¹ WAAA AGM minutes, secretary's report, 1 Mar. 1930.

⁶² WAAA committee minutes, 22 Oct. 1932.

⁶³ WAAA AGM minutes, 26 Jan. 1929.

energy to developing women's athletics on a regional and national scale. Vera was secretary of Middlesex County and Middlesex Ladies Athletic Club, secretary of the WAAA and later president. Marea Hartman competed for her club and area in the thirties and, again briefly, after the war until 1950 when she turned to administration instead. As well as treasurer of Spartan LAC, she was treasurer of the WAAA from 1950 until 1960, when she became secretary. Vera Searle remained involved with the WAAA as president, until she received the minutes of a meeting that indicated that the women's association accepted, in principle, amalgamation with the AAA. Although Marea Hartman was not particularly in favour of the merger, she did continue to be involved and was president of the AAA of England until her death in 1994. In addition to being a 'tireless champion of women's athletics', she was also honorary treasurer of the Central Council of Physical Recreation from 1984 until she died.⁶⁴

Most Welsh clubs were affiliated to the MCWAAA until 1950, when they created their own territorial association.⁶⁵ Welsh athletes had their own national championships and in 1954 there was a match between the Welsh WAAA and the MCWAAA. This was a great success and although the midland athletes had a

⁶⁴ Interviews with Marea Hartman and Vera Searle. See also, J. Rodda, 'Wisdom on the track', The Guardian, 31 Aug. 1994. This is an obituary of Marea Hartman. Rodda points out that Marea Hartman's full name was Gladys Marea Hartman. She was always known as Marea and is therefore referred to as this throughout the thesis.

⁶⁵ It should be noted that a few Welsh clubs had belonged to the NCWAAA. See the WAAA honorary secretary's report', 1950-1951. There had been calls from Welsh clubs, in 1949, for a separate organisation but this was rejected as there was only three clubs. The WAAA felt the Welsh should wait until they were stronger. Mrs Nelson-Neal, representing the MCWAAA, argued they should be allowed to establish their own association in order to help progress, but the WAAA General Committee rejected this. For details see, WAAA General Committee, 22 Oct. 1949.

comfortable win, the competition was reported to have increased interest in women's athletics within Wales.⁶⁶

Scotland remained separate and established their own WAAA in the early thirties. The association held annual championships and was represented at the Blackpool International in 1936. In 1933, it was announced that a working agreement was to be proposed with the Northern Irish AAA, while Bill Pepper was to negotiate with the Scots. Regrettably, the president of the Northern Irish AAA admitted that it would be 'impossible at the moment to form an Association' there.⁶⁷ Activity did slowly expand and in 1950 a Northern Ireland WAAA was founded. Nine women's clubs had affiliated by the following year, but the association faced a continual struggle to survive, let alone expand.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, in 1951 the first triangular match between women representing Scotland, Northern Ireland and England took place at Dunoon. Following this, there were annual matches during the fifties between teams of English and Scottish athletes.⁶⁹

While the separate area associations in England and Wales were largely in control of athletics in their own geographical areas, they all affiliated to the WAAA. The rules stated that

the Northern Counties, Midland Counties and Southern Counties shall have the power to affiliate County Associations, or, if considered necessary, to appoint District Representatives to assist in the encouragement, organisation and management of Amateur Athletics in their respective Counties and Districts and the promotion of County or District Championships. The Rules, Laws, Duties and Powers of any

⁶⁶ WAAA General Committee, Welsh report, 9 Oct. 1954.

⁶⁷ WAAA committee minutes, 6 May 1933.

⁶⁸ See P. Pozzoli, *Irish Women's Athletics* (1977), for more detail.

⁶⁹ WAAA honorary secretary's report, 1950-1951 and 1953.

County Associations for the guidance and governing of the County Associations are to be considered and drawn up by the Management Committee and brought before a Special General Meeting of the WAAA⁷⁰

Once the area associations⁷¹ were established, the individual clubs, schools and other institutions that had athletic sections for women, all affiliated to their own territorial governing body rather than directly to the WAAA. The area associations affiliated to the WAAA on behalf of all. County associations, which began to emerge shortly after the area associations, were also affiliated to the territorial associations. Individual clubs joined the county association as well as the area association. The WAAA was the only body that had the power to alter or create rules and to introduce new events or distances. It was also solely responsible for national and international team selections. For the area or county matches the relevant association picked their own athletes, but all meeting dates had to be agreed by the WAAA and were not allowed if they clashed with a national event. Each club could send one representative with the power to vote to the WAAA General Meetings. Additional people from clubs could also attend, but they did not have a vote. Voting was by a show of hands although a ballot could be requested by anyone who preferred that method.⁷²

A great majority of the area associations' business was taken up with sorting out arguments between athletes and clubs, particularly with reference to the first and second-claim rule. These disputes were looked at by a 'hardship committee'. Athletes joined a club as a first-claim member but could also join another as a second-claim member. This usually occurred if a woman wanted to run cross country and her first-claim club did not have the relevant Section. Athletes could then compete for their

⁷⁰ WAAA AGM minutes, 31 Oct. 1931.

⁷¹ Area associations are also referred to as territorial associations.

⁷² WAAA AGM minutes, 31 Oct. 1931.

second-claim club during the winter. One could also compete for a second-claim club if the first-claim club did not enter a team for a specific event. Athletes sometimes decided to change their first-claim allegiance, and run for the club that had been their second-claim. This often caused ill feeling between relevant club officials. There were strict rules controlling this practice, and an athlete had to have paid all past membership fees, in full, before resigning. The resignation had to be accepted by the athlete's present club committee, who then had to notify the preferred club before an athlete could become an active member. Athletes who failed to pay their fees, did not adhere to WAAA rules, or chose to compete in a meeting after accepting an invitation, without any excuse, were entered into the association's 'Black Book'. All three area associations, as well as the national governing body, had a 'black book' and all names were sent to the WAAA so that a central register was available. The rules stated that

every person whose name had been so entered in the Black Book shall be suspended from competing at any meeting held under the WAAA Laws until the liability causing her said expulsion, which shall not exceed one year's subscription, shall have been discharged.⁷³

When female athletics was just establishing itself, people who were interested in officiating were co-opted on to WAAA committees very quickly. Vera Searle, who became involved in the WAAA in 1923, recalled that 'they were begging for committee members, you only had to do something to get your name in the paper and (you were) voted on at the next annual general meeting'.⁷⁴ However, once the sport became more developed, the recognised route to becoming a WAAA official was

⁷³ 'WAAA Constitution Laws, Rules For Meetings, Competitions Etc., Revised to January 1933', p. 6. A copy of this is held in the WAAA files.

⁷⁴ Interview with Vera Searle.

through your territorial association. The first step was to be a representative of your club at an area committee meeting, after which one could be selected to represent the area at the WAAA meetings. The next step was to be voted on to the Executive or to work on a sub-committee. Once the county associations were formed, the first stage in the process would be to represent your club at the county committee meetings. Speaking in 1993, Marea Hartman described her progression through the administrative ranks:

you started with a club, you'd go through to your county, which (for me) was Surrey, then you'd go through to your area, which was the Southern Counties, and then you'd go up to the WAAA. Yes you actually came up through the system in those days, it doesn't happen so much now but you definitely had to in those days. You had to earn your spurs in those days.⁷⁵

There were relatively few people involved in the administration of the sport, although numbers did of course increase as it developed. In recent years the dramatic growth of veteran athletics, which caters for women over thirty-five and men over forty, has been blamed for the difficulty in attracting officials. Veteran athletics was certainly not to blame in the early years, as it did not exist as a separate or thriving sphere of athletics. The problem was that female athletes did not in general remain in the sport once they had stopped competing. Most women left the sport when they got married and the majority of those still involved disappeared once they had children. Inevitably, women who were comfortably off, or had no family remained in the sport the longest and held the most influential positions. An analysis of committees shows the same names repeatedly, with the length of service, as we have seen, quite remarkable in some cases. While their individual commitment cannot be denied, the

⁷⁵ Interview with Marea Hartman.

fact that the governing bodies were largely static in membership may well have had a stifling effect.

A similar method existed in the territories, as far as representation on committees was concerned. Mrs Winnie Haywood, who was a field event judge, recalled how she first sat on her club committee, then represented it at the Midland Counties WAAA. Once there she was selected to be Minutes Secretary, followed by a place on 'The Handicapping Board of Control'. She spent a total of thirty-six years as an assistant secretary, first to Mrs Nelson-Neal and then to her successor, Norma Blaine.⁷⁶ Both these women were members of BHLS, which was the largest women's club in the Midlands and had always had a large presence on the area executive. Both Winnie and Norma recalled that

Birchfield were very dominant within the Midland Counties. It was because Nelson pushed us you see ... It was through Nelson that we all carried on more or less ... and Nelson never went away.⁷⁷

Somehow, we always seemed to be trained and I don't know if it was Nelson that did it, but we always seemed channelled to go on to a committee meeting, and from that committee meeting you go on to a national body, and I'm sure that's how I progressed...⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Interview with Mrs Winnie Haywood. She finally retired from that position when the men and women's associations merged in 1992. In addition to her role as secretary, Winnie Haywood was president of the MCWAAA and was honoured with a life vice-presidency. More recently, she was made a life member of the Midland Athletic Association, which now governs both male and female athletics.

⁷⁷ Interview with Winnie Haywood.

⁷⁸ Interview with Norma Blaine, 12 May 1993.

The one weakness in the administrative structure was that once people were voted on to committees they tended to remain involved for a long time. This meant that the officials became increasingly older than the majority of athletes. After the war, some athletes felt that this prevented them from developing an administrative career once they had finished competing. Sylvia Cheeseman felt athletes were actively blocked from gaining WAAA executive positions. So although the association was democratic in practice, the fact that all positions were amateur meant that new faces became increasingly rare on committees.⁷⁹

Further information on male support is provided with reference to clubs in the next chapter, but this section will discuss how many women were drawn into the organisation of women's athletics through the interest in sport of their male relatives. In the case of Mrs Ruth Taylor, her choice of husband resulted in a long-term involvement with the NCWAAA. Initially she would accompany him when he travelled to the athletic or football meetings in which he competed. He was an active sportsman from 1919 until 1927, when he became an official of his athletic club in 1928. Mrs Taylor's involvement grew when she was persuaded to become ladies' captain of the 'Athletic Club' in 1929, in order that female members could be accepted. In 1932, Mrs Taylor was voted honorary secretary of the Northern Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association and continued in this role for eighteen years. In 1950 she retired, only to become president instead.⁸⁰ Although Taylor was involved in controversy after the 1950 Empire and Commonwealth Games, she clearly played an important role in the development of women's athletics.⁸¹ The voluntary activities of Mr and Mrs Taylor were not limited to track and field. They

⁷⁹ Interview with Sylvia Disley (née Cheeseman), 19 Jul. 1995.

⁸⁰ Report of the WAAA AGM minutes, *Athletics Weekly*, 11 Feb. 1950, p. 13.

⁸¹ She was one of the first women to judge at international level, including at the Olympic Games. In 1950, the WAAA made her a life vice-president of the association in honour of her years of involvement.

were involved in numerous voluntary clubs in their home area. They had both the necessary time and money required to provide such service, and often travelled at their own expense to officiate at both athletic and cycling events.⁸² As well as her regional work, she was also an executive member of the WAAA and team manager to area and international women's teams. Ruth Taylor did not have children and was therefore less restricted than many of her generation.

Although more detail is known about the leading figures in each area association, many others also provided considerable service. The available sources have resulted in more knowledge about the MCWAAA, but there is no reason to think that it was significantly different from either the North or South. Mrs Winnifred Hughes retired in 1949, after twenty-seven years as honorary secretary of the WAAA. In addition to her secretarial duties, she had been involved in the Cross Country Section and in the organisation of WAAA championships. As a reflection of just how much work was done by a few individuals, it is worth noting she also represented the WAAA, on both the British Amateur Athletic Association and the Empire Games Council.

The Governing of Cross Country and Road Walking

In the early years of women's athletics, the WAAA General Committee was responsible for all sections of the sport. As the number of individuals and affiliated clubs began to increase, several sub-committees were created in order to look after specific issues, such as championships and the selection of international teams. In 1928, it was suggested that cross country should be organised as a separate section by the sub-committee responsible for this branch of the sport. It was proposed that the authority of the WAAA should be established in two committees. One would be

⁸² '50 years joint service to sport'. Undated and anonymous newspaper cutting, held in the NCWAAA files at the NCAL, Birmingham University.

responsible for track and field and the other for cross country.⁸³ There was considerable discussion about this proposition, which suggested that not all members of the WAAA General Committee agreed. However, on 5 November 1928, the WAAA Constitution was amended so that a Cross Country Section could be established. As in the case of track and field, clubs affiliated to their territorial associations. The objects of the WAAA Cross Country Section were:

- To encourage, develop and control cross country running.
- To organise an Annual Cross Country Championship meeting and such other competitions as the Executive Committees may decide.
- To formulate, adopt, and administer such laws governing cross country running as may be from time to time considered desirable by the Executive.
- To assist in the formation of County and District Committees, to develop cross country running in their areas, and to ensure the observance of WAAA laws.⁸⁴

The WAAA executive was clearly determined not to lose their power over all spheres of the women's sport, although it had agreed to a separate section. The rules included one on 'Government', which stated that 'the Executive of the Cross Country Section shall consist of the Executive Officials of the WAAA, e.g. president, vice-presidents, honorary treasurer, and honorary secretary (as elected at the Annual General Meeting of the WAAA)'. The remaining seven members were elected at the annual council meeting of the Cross Country Section, which had to be held in

⁸³ WAAA minutes of the Cross Country Section, 14 May 1928.

⁸⁴ WAAA minutes of the Cross Country Section, 5 Nov. 1928.

September at the latest. This was the start of the winter season, which continued until 31 March. All members of the Executive Committee, plus one representative from each district had a vote. In addition, each individual club affiliated to their territorial cross country section, was entitled to two votes. Further evidence of the overall authority exercised by the national governing body, was shown by the fact that the executive controlled the finances of the Cross Country Section.⁸⁵

By the late 1930's, several more rules had been added and small details referring to the governing of cross country had been changed. Although the Cross Country Section was responsible for this branch of the sport, a new rule which stated that 'No regulation made by such section is valid which contravenes the Laws or Rules of the WAAA', was added to the original constitution. This made it clear that the WAAA retained overall authority. Any protest made against the Cross Country Section had to be sent to the honorary secretary of the WAAA, after which the General Committee made the final decision. Several of the additional rules referred to the way cross country was organised at club level. The minimum age that a girl could compete had been eighteen, but in 1931 this was reduced to sixteen. Novice races were held, which catered for any athlete who 'has not since the age of 16 won an award in an open event at 800 metres or upwards.' A territorial badge, which was presented when an athlete represented their area for cross country, was considered an award. When the title was changed to 'junior races', entry was open to competitors who had not won 'an award in the National Senior Cross Country Championships or been in the first three in the National Junior or Senior Territorial Championship, or in the winning team of the National Junior or Senior Territorial Championships.' In this case, an international badge was considered an award. Qualification for the junior race was not on age.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ WAAA AGM minutes, 28 Jan. 1928. See also, 'WAAA Cross Country Section Constitution Laws', as amended at a committee meeting held on 5 Nov. 1928.

⁸⁶ 1939 WAAA rules.

Many of the rules reflected the small number of athletes involved in cross country, especially in the initial years of the sport. For instance, a Miss A. Williams of Littlehampton Athletic Club, who was entered as an individual because her club was unable to raise a team, won the first national cross country championship held in 1927. This was also the case for the subsequent three years, when Miss L. Styles of the same club won the race on each occasion. In later years, clubs wishing to compete in any event promoted by the WAAA, were required not only to be affiliated to their relevant territorial association, but also to have at least four first-claim members who were active in cross country. The new rule appeared to be an effort to encourage all interested athletes to join a club with a cross country section, in order to strengthen the team competition. As stated earlier, if an athlete belonged to a club with fewer than the necessary four active members, she could represent a second-claim club when she competed over the country. If, however, her first-claim club created a cross country section she must begin to participate for them. In order to guard against athletes changing clubs in the middle of either the summer or winter seasons, a new rule was introduced which meant that an athlete must have resigned twelve months previously, before being eligible for her new club. In the case of smaller clubs, which on occasion joined forces or were absorbed by larger ones, the membership was transferred with the athlete unless they indicated otherwise.⁸⁷

The structure of women's athletics remained the same until 1950, when the MCWAAA proposed at the WAAA Annual General Meeting (AGM) that a separate association should be formed, to govern cross country running and road walking events.⁸⁸ This was not the first time that the idea had been considered. In 1937-38, the WAAA established a committee made up of three representatives of each area association, to discuss whether a separate association should be created. This

⁸⁷ Contained in a 'Cross Country Running' file that listed the association rules. This was undated but was with information referring to the 1937 and 1938 AGM minutes, and 1939 committee minutes.

⁸⁸ Report on WAAA AGM, *Athletics Weekly*, 11 Feb. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 6. p. 13.

committee was no doubt prevented from developing its ideas due to the war.⁸⁹ While cross country was pioneered largely by London Olympiades Athletic Club, the Midlands became the strongest cross country area. It was, therefore, no surprise that it was the MCWAAA that requested the formation of a separate Cross Country and Road Walking Association (CC and RWA), in 1950. Pallett agreed with the establishment of a new section, arguing that because

the WAAA ... has no paid servants, and exists by the self-sacrificing efforts of the honorary officers who must find the national organisation a heavy burden ... the decentralisation may help both.⁹⁰

The new association was established in Birmingham on 16 September 1950.⁹¹ It was the only branch of women's athletics to be co-ordinated outside London and the southern-dominated WAAA. This was not a sign, however, that the WAAA was about to organise the summer championships, or WAAA committee meetings, in more convenient locations for those residing outside the southern regions. The acceptance that the C.C. and R.W.A. could be organised in the Midlands reflected the fact that this part of the sport was less popular among southern clubs and their members, who sat on the national committee. Mary French, a BHLS athlete, was a founder member of the CC and RWA. She explained the decision to request a separate section as 'breaking away' from the WAAA. Quite simply, enthusiasts of these two branches of the sport felt that they were being neglected by the national governing body, who were failing to give them the necessary attention and support required to expand. The new association did not, however, 'break away' from the WAAA. It was decided that although the CC and RWA would be financially

⁸⁹ MCWAAA committee minutes, Jul. 1937.

⁹⁰ Pallett, *Women's Athletics*, p. 175.

⁹¹ Op Cit.

independent, it would remain affiliated to the national body and was subsequently represented at the WAAA meetings by two delegates.

The Organisation of Women's Athletics During the War

As we have seen, the WAAA was established throughout Britain by 1939. This chapter will not go into detail about the effect of the war, but instead will concentrate on a few issues that concerned women's athletics during the hostilities and post-war years. As one would expect, the growth of the sport was interrupted and indeed the WAAA effectively closed down. In January 1940, the MCWAAA reported that they had received confirmation that neither the WAAA nor SCWAAA would be maintaining activity during the war. Although they had no written notice from the NCWAAA, they believed the same to be true for them.⁹² In addition to a board of trustees, an Emergency Committee was established to be responsible for the national association. The WAAA stated that

no activities of a national character can be undertaken. However it is hoped that clubs, County Associations and Territorial Associations will do whatever local conditions permit to keep the interest of the women athletes, so that when the time arrives the whole Association can once again function to its full capacity.'⁹³

The MCWAAA discussed its own future in August 1940. The honorary secretary told members that their

⁹² MCWAAA committee minutes, 18 Jan. 1940.

⁹³ Circular sent from WAAA to affiliated clubs and associations. Undated but in WAAA 1939 file.

Trustees consider that the Association shall continue to control athletics in our area, and to see that all competitions etc., should be run according to the WAAA and MCWAAA rules, although it was not thought possible, or advisable, to stage Midland Senior Championships, in view of travelling and black-out conditions, and agreed the suspension of affiliation fees, it being pointed out that in the case of new clubs they would have to pay their first year's affiliation of 7/6d (36½p) and this would hold good for one year after the cessation of hostilities.⁹⁴

One committee member, Mr Harrison, agreed that the association should definitely carry on, 'as in his opinion it would be fatal to let athletics drop just as the time was ripe for making a success of it'.⁹⁵ Because travelling was not easy, only one representative from each club attended association meetings, instead of two. However, members agreed that all officers, vice-presidents, and the usual four members of the committee would continue until further notice. The number of committee meetings was reduced from ten each year, to three in the summer and three in the winter.⁹⁶ To solve the problem of clubs closing down and athletes being lost to the sport, the rules were temporarily altered to allow individuals to join surviving clubs for the duration of the war. Athletes were able to compete immediately for their new club and revert again within a month of the war ending.⁹⁷ The MCWAAA proposed that races should be started earlier so that athletes would be home before the blackout. Concern was expressed by the BHLS representative that the cost of race permits was too high, as clubs were struggling to keep their membership up during

⁹⁴ MCWAAA committee minutes, 1 Aug. 1940.

⁹⁵ MCWAAA committee minutes, 14 Dec. 1940.

⁹⁶ MCWAAA committee minutes, Jan. 1940.

⁹⁷ MCWAAA committee minutes, 1 Aug. 1940.

these years. There was no change, however, and in defence Mrs Nelson-Neal replied that race permits had to be obtained, so that the area association had the power to check that a race was being organised in accordance with their rules.⁹⁸

Apart from the obvious effect that the absence of national competition had on women's athletics, the war also ended plans by the WAAA to ask for more financial help from the government. Pressure was again expressed after the war, but although in 1947 the AAA received a grant of £2,250 from the Ministry of Education to pay for equipment and national coaches, the WAAA was not provided with the same help.⁹⁹ The first 'full meeting' since the AGM in 1938 was held by the WAAA in October 1942. Many members were absent because they either could not travel to London or could not be contacted. The main concern of the association was that athletics should be able to attract younger girls into the sport by the end of the war. There had been an increased number of social and sporting activities available to young people during the war and the WAAA chairman, Mrs Taylor, argued that it was very important that the WAAA remained active in order to meet the greater demand for organised activities. Some committee members expressed opposition to the suggestion that the WAAA should organise events while the war was in progress. However, Mrs Nelson-Neal argued that the association could discuss plans with the armed services, to see if their members might become involved with events organised by the WAAA. It was decided that the area associations would be the best placed to approach local contacts to see if they could establish activity.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ MCWAAA committee minutes, 14 Dec. 1940. Race permits cost 1/- (5p).

⁹⁹ The Times, 24 Jul. 1947. The equipment was stored by county associations and made available to clubs, voluntary associations and schools. WAAA files note that the money was also used to fund the coaching scheme. At the WAAA AGM, 9 Feb. 1958, it was decided that the WAAA should apply for similar funding to that granted to the AAA but there was no subsequent evidence that it was ever received.

¹⁰⁰ WAAA General Committee, 31 Oct. 1942.

The following year the WAAA held a War Emergency Committee. The MCWAAA was the only association reported to have an established programme of events, although thirty-three permits were issued within the southern area. These would have been for women's races within AAA and open meetings.¹⁰¹ In 1945, between twelve and fourteen events were organised throughout the South. Women's events were included in four meetings organised by the AAA and five by the London County Council. The Midlands were praised for having 'maintained some wonderful contact during the past season and (having) done a tremendous amount of work to keep the interest going of women's athletics.' It was also hoped to hold the first post-war WAAA Championships in 1944, but this had to be postponed because of the threat of bombing raids, plus the fact that a suitable ground could not be found. Such dangers and practical difficulties led to committee members recommending that cross country should not be revived during hostilities. Although local activities were organised, it was not surprising that national events were not re-established until 1945.¹⁰²

As we have seen, the SCWAAA and MCWAAA were organising events in their respective localities. Consequently, these two areas were represented in the first post-war track and field inter-territorial contest, held in 1945. Despite the fact that the Midlands had been active throughout the war, the southern team was victorious. Cross country was not so well supported, and in 1945 the WAAA noted that 'only one club will be able to indulge in this branch of the sport'. The main problem was the lack of suitable courses, and reports indicated that the situation was 'getting worse owing to Local Borough Councils claiming all open spaces for building'. The NCWAAA was slower to return to pre-war activities. In September 1945, it was

¹⁰¹ War Emergency Committee, 6 Nov. 1943.

¹⁰² WAAA AGM minutes, 31 Oct 1942 and 3 Mar. 1945.

merely reported that 'a meeting would be held shortly to get the Association going once more.'¹⁰³

Financial Pressures After the War

The whole country faced financial problems during and after the war, and women's athletics was no exception. Anxiety, caused by the nation's austerity, was high on the agenda in 1945. The honorary secretary of the SCWAAA was forced to request a loan from the WAAA. Nevertheless, the SCWAAA reported that apart from a lack of money they were returning to pre-war levels of activity. Although several of the larger clubs were slow to re-establish themselves, new clubs were leading the way.¹⁰⁴ Financial problems were of course not a new concern nor were they restricted to any single area association. In 1940, in an attempt to increase funds, the MCWAAA had written to all clubs with outstanding affiliation fees. However, several had closed down, some because of the war but others, like Lucas, 'owing to lack of funds'.¹⁰⁵ The same year they announced that they would sell 'guess the time' tickets at their walking championships. There was a great need to clear outstanding debts and raise some money. Consequently, the committee decided to write to all their patrons and request a 2/6 (12½p) donation.¹⁰⁶ Dances and raffles were also organised by both the area committees and the WAAA to raise funds.

County associations in particular struggled when they were first founded. Yorkshire County WAAA was unable to present medals at their cross country championship in 1937, while both Warwickshire and Middlesex had to request

¹⁰³ War Emergency Committee, 29 Sept. 1945. Chapter two provides more detail about the resurgence of activity in each area.

¹⁰⁴ War Emergency Committee, 29 Sept. 1945.

¹⁰⁵ MCWAAA committee minutes, 1 Aug. 1940.

¹⁰⁶ MCWAAA committee minutes, Jan. 1940.

donations from their affiliated clubs, none of whom were well off themselves. Committee meetings were regularly held in people's houses in order to save money.¹⁰⁷ The most pioneering clubs, such as Birmingham Atlanta, Birchfield Harriers Ladies' Section (BHLS), London Olympiads Athletic Club (LOAC), Middlesex, and Ilford Ladies Athletic Club, all faced greater financial demands than some of the smaller ones. This was because they often promoted open and inter-club races. WAAA rules stated that 'The application must be accompanied by a registration fee of not less than 5/- (12½p) (although) where the first prize does not exceed 20/- (£1.00), the registration fee may be reduced to 2/6 (12½p).' Only a 'promotion for purely charitable objects (could) be granted a free registration'.¹⁰⁸ The host clubs also had to purchase prizes unless a sponsor could be found, hire the ground, and provide refreshments for both athletes and officials. Newspaper sponsorship and financial help from patrons enabled far more activity than would have otherwise been available.

By the 1960s it was apparent that financial problems were not limited to the women's side of the sport. Indeed, the WAAA was often reported to be better off than the AAA. The British Amateur Athletic Board (BAAB),¹⁰⁹ of which the WAAA was a co-opted member, was responsible for international athletics and existed solely on 'money from television and any profits from international matches'. By 1966, the Board was in debt to the News of the World by about £10,000 and a second un-

¹⁰⁷ For example, see E. F. de Roeck, A History of Rotherham Harriers and Athletic Club 1887-1987 (de Roeck, 1987). Information on Middlesex and Warwickshire were drawn from interviews with Mrs Winnifred Haywood, 9 May 1994, Norman Walker, 10 May 1994, and London Olympiads committee minutes.

¹⁰⁸ MCWAAA minutes, 28 Jul. 1943.

¹⁰⁹ The BAAB was founded in 1932, after the Scottish AAA asked for separate affiliation to the IAAF. Because the IAAF rules indicate that only one governing body can be recognised from each country, this was rejected. Instead, an International Board was formed to represent all areas of the United Kingdom. In 1937 the name was changed to the BAAB.

named creditor by £2,000. The main problem was that there had been a big decline in attendances at international events since the 1950's. Although both the AAA and BAAB (but not the WAAA) received about £6,000 from the British Broadcasting Corporation annually, plus £2,000 each time a meeting was shown on television, they had huge expenses.¹¹⁰ The Board paid for all airfares of international teams, and during the years when crowds had been larger, they had given much of their profits back to the individual athletic associations. By the mid-sixties, the sport was suffering from falling gate receipts throughout Europe and this had an obvious effect on the level of funding from within the sport itself.¹¹¹

Increasing Criticism of the WAAA

Criticism was frequently expressed about the lack of women's results published in Athletics, later known as Athletics Weekly, which was the sport's premier magazine after the war. In response the editor, Peter Green, always replied that the clubs and women's associations were at fault because they rarely sent information.¹¹² He argued that the

administrative side of athletics and particularly cross country running, seems to enjoy a cloak of anonymity and silence. One official suggested this week that it was probably due to the fact that most women officials are married - she says that single girls won't take on

¹¹⁰ The Government contributed £2,700 in 1965/6 and £3,500 in 1966/7. However, the costs of airfares added up to over £8,000 and £12,500 respectively.

¹¹¹ All information for this paragraph came from an undated report by the BAAB held in WAAA files for 1966-7.

¹¹² As has been made clear, this complaint and explanation was repeated several times but one example can be found in Athletics Weekly, 11 Dec. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 50, p. 6.

any jobs! - and having Sunday dinner to cook and husbands to look after makes it difficult for them to send along any results for publication. Sounds a pretty thin excuse. It seems to me that they are just not interested in whether or not the athletes and other enthusiasts find their results in print.¹¹³

Despite Green's dismissal of the argument that women lacked time to spend on athletics, it was in fact a very real problem for the WAAA. As we have seen, it was mostly women without children who were able to dedicate more energy and time to the sport. Norma Blaine, a Birchfield Harriers athlete in the fifties who subsequently went into administration, acknowledged that being single enabled her to pursue her sporting interest. Her comments clearly show that the reality for many women did indeed prevent them from involving themselves in the WAAA, and unlike Green, she suggested that their domestic roles were not a 'pretty thin excuse':

there was a very small core of people (involved) and I had got the time so therefore I could go to the meetings; being married you had to go home and get your husband's tea and that kind of thing whereas I'd got Mum here ... and I'm going back to when I was quite old, not a teenager, so I knew that Mum would have my tea ready, Mum would have done my washing and ironing. I'd got no housework to do, so my Mum was great to me as far as I'm concerned, and I couldn't have done it without her.

As we have seen, the WAAA was a voluntary association, so it was only those individuals who had the time and money who could take the central administrative roles. Blaine acknowledged their contribution:

¹¹³ Athletics Weekly, 8 Jan. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 2, p. 3.

they were characters in the sport and I don't think they'll be back ... I don't think there is such commitment from people today to devote their lives to the sport as much.¹¹⁴

The WAAA honorary secretary stated in 1955, that it was not the job of their voluntary officials to do journalistic tasks. However, the magazine required the officials to send in results as they did not have the staff to cover all events. The fact that greater emphasis was given to men's meetings in the written media increased the need for WAAA officials, already very busy with paid and domestic work as well as athletic administration, to send in information.¹¹⁵ This was the only way to increase knowledge about the majority of women's meetings.

A second critical theme that was frequently mentioned in Athletics Weekly was the poor organisation at women's championships. In 1956 the editor was not impressed by the Kent County Championships, which he felt was inefficiently run. The events started half-an-hour late,¹¹⁶ a fact that he claimed was not unique to this occasion. There were more athletes than lanes in one race and Green had to alert the Clerk of the Course that some of the hurdles were missing. Although he admitted the competition was of a high standard, the inference was that the organisation did not live up to the competition.¹¹⁷ Similar comments were made in The Times, which wrote that although women's athletics in Britain was second only to the Russian

¹¹⁴ Both quotes are taken from an interview with Norma Blaine.

¹¹⁵ Athletics Weekly, 17 Sept. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 38, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ George Pallett made this point in Athletics Weekly, 3 Sept. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 36, pp. 4-5. A late start would not only cause problems for athletes travelling a long way, but it also meant they were often standing around getting cold after completing their warm up. This could negatively effect the standards of performances rather than just being inconvenient.

¹¹⁷ Athletics Weekly, 2 Jun. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 22, p. 3.

international team by the mid-fifties, even better performances would be recorded 'if only the officiating was of the same standard as that for the men'.¹¹⁸ Further complaints were made after the WAAA Junior Cross Country Championships. The officials did not notice lane infringements, and there were so many athletes that the preliminary rounds and field competitions took too long. Pallett commented that, although

officiating is an honorary and wearing job ... those who undertake it owe it to their sport and to the athletes to do a good job. They can penalise an infraction of the rules, but what redress has an athlete against ignorance and sometimes stupid decisions?¹¹⁹

The problems were not restricted to the track and field meetings but were also evident at cross country championships. The junior championships of 1951 were described as 'chaos', with the runners not knowing where to finish, a failure to record all the finishers correctly and again a late start. The clubs were as unhappy as the Athletics Weekly correspondent was. Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section submitted a joint protest along with Spartan, Oldbury and Dudley Ladies' Athletic Clubs.¹²⁰

Starters in particular were criticised, as it was felt that athletes did not have enough time to settle before they fired the gun. There was also a feeling that too many false starts were not penalised, allowing some athletes to gain an unfair advantage. In addition, officials were not always familiar with the competition rules. Although it was claimed that athletes were also concerned about the standard of officiating, there was little written evidence to support this. It was suggested in Athletics Weekly that

¹¹⁸ The Times, 9 Jul. 1956.

¹¹⁹ G. Pallett, 'This Women's World', Athletics Weekly, 23 Jun. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 25, p. 11.

¹²⁰ G. Pallett, 'Women's National Junior Cross Country Championship', Athletics Weekly, 17 Feb. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 7, p. 6.

athletes were afraid they would be omitted from teams if they criticised the WAAA.¹²¹

When people did speak out, the usual complaints were that the WAAA failed to notify athletes of altered event times, or that there were too many entries for the available lanes.¹²² In the case of the former, some problems were due to the increasing number of athletes entering the championships. In line with their policy of looking after the youngsters and in contrast to the AAA, the WAAA did not introduce standards to limit the number of competitors. The women's committees, who wanted to encourage all levels of athletes, did not welcome the men's policy. Peter Walker, chairman of Harrogate Athletic Club, argued that in order to enable all athletes in the country to compete, the championships should be rotated between the North, South and Midlands.¹²³ This, however, was never an idea supported by the southern-dominated WAAA, and the championships remained in London until the AAA and WAAA merged in 1991. In 1945, Mrs Nelson-Neal suggested that the Midlands would be satisfied if they and the NCWAAA had an opportunity of holding the championships once in three years. In response, the southern delegates argued that it would 'be a hardship' for some of their members to have to travel, although this was not considered an issue for those who lived in either the North or Midlands. It was felt that matches would receive better support if they remained in the South but, as the WAAA championships were never blessed with significant crowds, this was not an especially convincing argument.¹²⁴

It was clear that regional rivalries and an anti-London feeling existed in women's athletics. MCWAAA minutes reveal a strong undercurrent of ill feeling

¹²¹ 'Be Fair to Athletes', Athletics Weekly, 11 Aug. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 32, pp. 6-7.

¹²² Athletics Weekly, 25 Aug. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 34, p. 5, 1 Sept. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 35, p. 3 and 16 Jul. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 29, p. 4.

¹²³ Athletics Weekly, 16 Jul. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 29, p. 4.

¹²⁴ WAAA AGM minutes, 1 Dec. 1945.

towards the WAAA committee. In 1938, during a discussion on whether athletes should be helped with their entry fees to the championships, some delegates argued that the national association, not the area association, should be asked to help, as they were much better off. In reply to the argument that

what helped the parent body helped us, Miss Nelson said she was willing to withdraw her remarks if anyone could point out anything whereby they had helped us. No one offered any suggestions.

Another committee member, Mr Lewis, clearly felt that the WAAA did not do enough to help athletes. He asserted that the area association 'did not want to copy the parent body, (but instead) needed to help our girls and so be progressive and get more support from the athletes'.¹²⁵ Mrs Nelson-Neal revealed her bitterness towards the national WAAA, whose policy to have meetings in London made it necessary for her to travel regularly.¹²⁶ The WAAA was clearly not felt to be supporting all its athletes as much as it should, and was felt to be sitting on money when the area associations and individual clubs were struggling to survive, let alone provide a good service. In addition, MCWAAA delegates argued that the national executive ignored their views, and their arguments were dismissed at times as simply making 'a lot of trouble over nothing'.¹²⁷ In March 1946, the MCWAAA secretary reported that

the last WAAA meeting in London had been very unsatisfactory, she was very dissatisfied and it was obvious that they were dead set against the Midlands ...

¹²⁵ MCWAAA committee minutes, Oct. 1938. Please note that 'support from the athletes' means in terms of numbers competing rather than financial contributions.

¹²⁶ MCWAAA committee minutes, Oct. 1938. 'Parent' is referring to the WAAA.

¹²⁷ MCWAAA committee minutes, Jul. 1945.

This particular dispute was about who was to be team manager at the European Championships in Oslo later that year. Both Mrs Nelson-Neal and the South's Mrs Harris initially received the same number of votes. Mrs Nelson-Neal subsequently stepped down, convinced that a re-count would go against her. The MCWAAA was poorly supported at the meeting and she felt there was southern bias within the WAAA.¹²⁸

The MCWAAA and NCWAAA were often on the same side, but it was by no means always the case that the southern association was seen as the enemy. One reason for discontent in the MCWAAA was the size of their territory, which was by far the smallest of the three areas. Delegates from the Midland Counties WAAA reported to their committee in 1958

that the WAAA AGM was an uproarious occasion from the start and our nomination of Mr Clarke as chairman had really upset everyone, and when we asked for more counties to level up the territories, we were slammed and Mrs Taylor told lies to uphold her decision. However, we should continue to press for more territories, as we are so small in comparison to the others.¹²⁹

Not all the comments about women's meetings were critical. The next chapter covers the growth of domestic competition in more detail and shows that they were often viewed in a very positive light. The 1950 WAAA championships was felt to prove that although

¹²⁸ MCWAAA committee minutes, 28 Mar. 1946. Mrs Nelson-Neal was voted assistant team manger.

¹²⁹ MCWAAA committee minutes, 29 Nov. 1958.

the organisation of women's athletic meetings seems to be slow compared to that of the men's championships ... given a fine day, a colourful stadium and women athletes, (you have) one of the best meetings in the world.¹³⁰

In addition to the general standard of organisation by the WAAA, the quality of coaching in women's athletics was also criticised,¹³¹ with the maintenance of old myths the primary concern. Of course, not all the coaches involved in women's athletics were female. As we have seen, many women found it hard to remain involved in the sport once they had married or had a family. Accordingly, the WAAA found it impossible to staff their meetings entirely with women.¹³² To support his call for greater encouragement of the new coaching scheme for women in the early fifties, Pallett gave a few examples of poor coaching advice:

When I hear a girl hurdler told to place her hands and front foot on the starting line to get nearer the first hurdle because she is having difficulty in reaching it - by a professed WAAA coach; when I hear that the scissors is the best high jump style for women; when I hear long jumpers told that the hitch kick is dangerous for women, that sprinters should jump out of their holes with both feet - heaven help the poor girls...¹³³

¹³⁰ Jean Robinson, 'Women's National Championships', Athletics Weekly, 15 Jul. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 28, p. 5.

¹³¹ G. Pallett, 'For the Ladies. Notes and Comments', Athletics Weekly, 3 Sept. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 36, pp. 4-5.

¹³² This is discussed in more detail in chapter three.

¹³³ 'Women's Athletics', Athletics Weekly, 17 Feb. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 7, p. 11.

Pallett felt that the problem of sub-standard coaches was worse within women's athletics than in men's. In 1951, he claimed that the women's side of athletics was

more hag-ridden by pseudo-coaches than ever the men's game is - in this respect women's athletics lags behind - and the men are to blame to some extent for the tardy recognition of women as a force in athletics.¹³⁴

Nevertheless, not all coaches of women athletes were of a poor standard. Probably the best-known female coach was Mrs Nelson-Neal of BHLS. Athletes and fellow officials alike consistently praised her knowledge and standard of advice.¹³⁵ In order to try to increase the number of female coaches and improve standards, the WAAA introduced a new coaching scheme in April 1950. Individuals were examined both on their practical skills and by an oral test that included a section on the rules of competition. Each area association had a coaching co-ordinator. However, as this scheme began in 1950 and complaints continued until well after this date, it was clear that it failed in its aim of being seen to raise standards.¹³⁶

Some success did result, with more women taking the exams and gaining knowledge. The year 1951-1952 saw 130 women qualify as coaches, including seven at senior level. The dominance of the southern area was emphasized by the fact that seventy-four of the women resided in this part of the country, compared to twenty-one in the North and twenty-four in the Midlands. There was a residential course at Bishop Abbey in 1950, while day courses were organised on a single day or over a

¹³⁴ Pallett, 'Women's National Junior Cross Country Championships', Athletics Weekly, 17 Feb. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 7, p. 11-12.

¹³⁵ See chapter two for more on this.

¹³⁶ L. Ward, 'The "Honorary Coach" Award', Athletics Weekly, 15 Apr. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 15, p. 10.

weekend at Lilleshall, Manchester and Beeches (East Anglia). As the scheme developed, the Central Council of Physical Recreation supported the WAAA.¹³⁷ By 1958, the association was able to announce that they had 'a panel of competent officials who are willing to be called upon to officiate at meetings throughout the Country'.¹³⁸ In 1959 a joint WAAA and AAA Coaching Committee was founded. This was hailed as a 'great advancement' by the women's association. It was decided that the AAA coaches would take the examination as more women were then expected to take the courses. One of the reasons for low attendance on courses run by the WAAA was that male coaches were still felt to be the experts.¹³⁹

Administrative Developments in the Fifties

The final section of this chapter will discuss two major developments in the organisation of women's athletics that occurred in the 1950's. It was suggested by the WAAA Emergency Committee that a Women's International Council should be formed. This had previously been discussed, in response to the wishes of the WAAA, at a BAAB meeting.¹⁴⁰ The aim was to 'encourage and assist in the promotion of International Amateur Athletics for women under the jurisdiction of the BAAB.' The council would have members representing Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, as well as England. A meeting to discuss this was held on 12 April 1956, and it was subsequently agreed that the committee would be responsible for international matters concerning women.

¹³⁷ WAAA honorary secretary's report, 1948-1949 and WAAA coaching report - 1951 to 1952, by Leonard H. Ward, honorary chief coach, Jan. 1952.

¹³⁸ WAAA honorary secretary's report, 7 Feb. 1959.

¹³⁹ Athletics Weekly, 7 Mar. 1959, Vol. 13, No. 10, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ BAAB committee meeting, 15 Jul. 1956.

Once women were involved in the same international championships as the men, they were represented at the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) committee meetings by the BAAB. This was because the IAAF only recognised one governing body from each country. An agreement had existed since before the war with the English WAAA and in 1947 they were accepted as members for the first time.¹⁴¹ However, this agreement did not cover any of the other British women's associations. Until the council was formed, team selections made by the English WAAA had to be agreed by the BAAB. In addition, invitations for women to compete internationally were sent initially to the BAAB, before being passed on to the WAAA. The women's associations had to apply to the BAAB for permission to stage record attempts and, from 1951, records had to be examined by the BAAB before they were recognised.¹⁴²

The support of men was crucial in getting better representation for the women's governing bodies. At the inaugural council meeting, Jack Crump, a long-term team manager of international British teams, commented that

the Board had appreciated all the help given by the WAAA and felt that this had helped towards the better understanding that now existed between the Associations. He said he felt he wished to see women better recognised in a proper capacity on the Board.¹⁴³

The constitution of the Women's International Council made it clear that this development did not undermine 'in any degree the complete domestic autonomy of the respective Associations'. The individual women's associations of England,

¹⁴¹ The Times, 25 Feb. 1947.

¹⁴² WAAA minutes of the International Sub-Committee, 4 Jul. 1953, and The Times, 7 Feb. 1951, p. 9.

¹⁴³ WAAA minutes of the International Sub-Committee, 12 Apr. 1956.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland selected their own three representatives, from which an honorary secretary and treasurer were chosen.

In 1959, the Women's International Council for the Home Countries was finally formed. In addition, it was agreed that two members of this had full voting power on the BAAB. The council was viewed as going 'a long way in making for better co-operation and understanding between the Governing bodies of athletics in Great Britain'.¹⁴⁴ The first representatives on the women's council were Mrs Amies and Miss Hartman, both of whom were members of the English WAAA. Mrs Amies was the first WAAA representative from the BAAB at the IAAF meetings, and she continued until 1958 when Marea Hartman replaced her.

The dominance of the English governing body was highlighted by the voting powers of the individual associations on the Women's Council. The English WAAA, which also represented Wales, had three votes, the Scottish WAAA two and Northern Ireland one.¹⁴⁵ The treasurer, secretary and chairman were English, which meant that in addition to their three delegates they had another two members of the WAAA on the council, although only three could actually vote.¹⁴⁶ The difference in the number of representatives mirrored the men's associations: the English AAA had six representatives, the Scottish AAA three, and the Northern Irish AAA two. The women's two votes for all their national associations is put into perspective when compared with the number of votes allocated to the separate men's associations.¹⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that on the occasion that the Women's Council was granted two

¹⁴⁴ *Athletics Weekly*, 7 Mar. 1959, Vol. 13, No. 10, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ BAAB Meeting, 11 Jun. 1959, and WAAA committee minutes, 18 Apr. 1959.

¹⁴⁶ Letter from Jack Crump, honorary secretary of the BAAB to all members of the Board, 26 May 1959. The first members of the council were chairman, Mrs Amies, secretary, Miss Hartman, treasurer, Mrs Leslie, WAAA, Mrs Amies, Mrs Nelson-Neal and Mrs Pope, Scottish WAAA, Miss Taylor and Mrs Williamson, Northern Ireland WAAA, Mrs Hopkins.

¹⁴⁷ BAAB Constitution.

votes, the AAA's number of votes was increased from five to six, suggesting that a compromise was required before the women gained full representation.¹⁴⁸ There had been friction between the two associations in the past, with the WAAA complaining that the AAA did not show their officials the respect they deserved. Mrs Amies, honorary secretary of the WAAA, was careful to differentiate between the BAAB and AAA when she complained that members of the AAA had shown 'an anti-woman attitude'.¹⁴⁹

Subsequently, complaints were made publicly by Mrs Amies that the WAAA could not work with the AAA. Although it was recognised that the dispute may well have been a clash of personalities, the fact that female athletes had enjoyed considerable international success was felt to be a reason for giving them more respect. The editor of Modern Athletics wrote that

I have never found the WAAA difficult to work with and there is no reason why in England - the only country incidentally where the men and women's athletics are organised separately - a common unity of purpose is not possible. A little diplomacy from individuals is all that is wanted.¹⁵⁰

This is something that was echoed by Marea Hartman, who recalled that Mrs Amies had 'quite strong disagreements' in public with Earnest Klines, the AAA honorary secretary. Hartman preferred to keep any 'disagreements' private when she took over as honorary secretary.

The second important development that occurred in 1956 was the introduction of an Athletes' Advisory Committee. This was created after the Melbourne Olympics,

¹⁴⁸ Letter to Jack Crump, 17 Nov. 1958.

¹⁴⁹ The Times, 30 Sept. 1958.

¹⁵⁰ Modern Athletics, Nov. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 11, p. 3.

where there was considerable unhappiness expressed by athletes about the team management. The primary concern was the management's reluctance to pay athletes 'pocket money', made available by the IAAF. The committee, which was established in 1957, consisted of representatives of the AAA, WAAA and BAAB, including a current international athlete or one who had been a member of the team during the last two years. Mrs Dorothy Tyler, who competed in the high jump at international level from 1936 through to 1956 and Marea Hartman represented the WAAA.

The committee was largely concerned with achieving better co-operation between athletes and officials and pressing for improved facilities at the large stadiums.¹⁵¹ The initial meetings had revealed 'a certain amount of mistrust', showing that those responsible for administering the sport were not always seen to be in touch with the athletes. Nevertheless, by the end of 1958, the Athletes' Advisory Committee was able to report that 'a much better understanding between the athlete's representatives and the representatives of the Board and the AAA and WAAA has been established.' In 1958, the AAA agreed that the WAAA could have two representatives on the committee rather than just one.¹⁵²

Although the relationship between the WAAA and AAA improved over the years, it was never an equal one. The AAA always had far greater representation and a larger number of votes, which resulted in an uneven balance of power. Some people felt, from a relatively early point in the history of women's athletics, that a joint association would serve the sport better. It must be noted though, that few of these voices were heard on WAAA committees, at either area or national level. The WAAA was staunchly against a merger, fearing with justification that the women's needs would receive far less attention. Many of the first members of the WAAA remembered quite bitter confrontations between the men and women and were very reluctant to lose their independence. As we have seen, Vera Searle promptly resigned

¹⁵¹ Letter from Mrs Tyler to all female athletes, contained in WAAA minutes, 24 Mar. 1958.

¹⁵² Minutes of the Athletes Advisory Committee, 1958.

as president on hearing the news that the WAAA was to merge with the men. She simply 'couldn't bear to be in office when the identity of the WAAA is swallowed up and the name disappears for ever'. Marea Hartman, although reluctant to change her mind, eventually did support the merger albeit with some misgivings. In 1993, she argued that 'some of these competent women are eventually going to pull out because I think they rather feel they are going to be swallowed up by the men'.¹⁵³

Negotiations finally resulted in the formation of the British Athletic Federation in 1991. The suggestion, however, was by no means such a recent one. In April 1966, the MCWAAA reported that rumours had been circulating about a merge with the men. However, despite an 'odd sly remark by some of the male officials' nothing formal had been said. Mrs Nelson-Neal felt that the main reason for the suggestion was that the WAAA was financially better off than the men's association. The important point, she remarked, was if a merger was seriously discussed the women's association should fight very hard for 'equal rights ... which would mean sharing the Presidency and the like'.¹⁵⁴ Her claims could have had some substance as, while both the AAA and WAAA lost money in this period, the women's association had greater reserve funds to draw upon. In 1959, for example, the WAAA lost just under £260 but had a balance of around £3,000. The AAA lost £6,400 and was forced to ask the WAAA for help. 'The women decided that a substantial donation - the amount to be decided by the Executive - should be given as a return for the assistance previously given them by the men'.¹⁵⁵

Many earlier members of the WAAA would have been very disappointed with the more recent developments in the organisation of the sport. Women like Vera Searle, who had been involved from the early twenties, remembered personal struggles with members of the men's governing bodies as they tried to get women's

¹⁵³ Interviews with Marea Hartman and Vera Searle.

¹⁵⁴ MCWAAA committee minutes, Apr. 1966.

¹⁵⁵ The Times, 8 Feb. 1960.

athletics established in England. Similarly, Marea Hartman had had to continuously fight to increase the women's competitive programme and break down myths that had restricted the sport's expansion. Consequently, the older members of the WAAA were loath to see changes unless they were sure women's athletics would benefit. They were adamant that the separate nature of women's athletics was necessary to safeguard the wishes of female athletes. The truth, however, was that the autonomy of the WAAA was undermined as soon as they lost sole responsibility for their own teams and instead were represented by the BAAB. In the fifties, the men's and women's associations increasingly began to work together. Although some individuals on both sides were not happy with this, it did have some advantages. Better sponsorship deals were available for men's meetings, due in part to the greater public interest. Once the two sides of the sport had one association, domestic championships as well as international matches could be held together and resources shared. It cannot be denied that in recent years the national championship has been better supported by the public. The stadium is usually full which provides an excellent atmosphere for both male and female competitors.

The growth of domestic competition reveals just how much women's athletics developed under the direction of the WAAA. While there were some women's races available before 1922, the women's association encouraged the acceptance of the sport and organised regular competition. The number of women's clubs began to increase, no doubt encouraged by the growth of competition and success of local women athletes. The establishment of women's clubs is examined in the next chapter and some of the issues already discussed will be developed. The evidence provided about the growth of domestic competition and the emergence of women's clubs is not only interesting in itself, but also underlines the geographical variations in the development of the sport.

Chapter Two

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S DOMESTIC ATHLETICS IN ENGLAND, 1918-1960

This aim of this chapter is to illustrate the growth of domestic competition in England. A brief discussion of events organised during the First World War is included, as this allows a clearer understanding of how much the situation changed once the WAAA was formed. Clubs have always been at the centre of track and field in Britain. Consequently, the vast majority of athletes experienced the sport through the competition and social life offered by their local club. Discovering information about women's clubs has been made harder because, as we have seen, the early minutes of the WAAA, which one would have expected to include details of the first clubs that affiliated, together with the dates they did so, have been lost. Further difficulties arise because the amateur and voluntary nature of British athletics meant that few clubs had a permanent clubhouse or office where records of meetings could be kept. Most club secretaries kept the minutes in their own homes, and over time, with changes of personnel, club headquarters and indeed the merging and demise of many of the first clubs, little of the original documentation remains.

Clubs were the main provider of athletics for women and if a local club did not exist, potential athletes had few opportunities to enjoy the sport and develop their talents. However, in a few districts, schools and universities gradually enlarged their athletic programmes and this did open the sport to more young women. The opposition traditionally expressed did not prevent athletics becoming an established part of physical education, and the main developments will be covered in this chapter. The second section will provide some socio/occupational evaluation of the athletes involved. Much of this information has been discovered through interviews. These also produced recollections about training and competition, how clubs functioned and

the kind of members that they attracted. The sport enabled women to experience the thrill of competition, enjoy freedom of movement and have a greater control over their own bodies.

Although opposition remained in the inter-war years particularly, the amount of competitive opportunities grew and women's athletics quickly became established in England. This would appear to be largely because attitudes differed significantly between those involved in the clubs and those responsible for taking the decisions governing *international* women's athletics. There was far more opposition to women's participation from within the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) than within the local clubs, where many of the positive developments were initially implemented. Many female athletes do not recall any specific hostility from male members of their clubs. Athletics has always been a sport dominated by male coaches, administrators, and officials. Men, who were usually ex-athletes themselves, trained the first women's international and domestic teams. This case at both exclusively female clubs and those had a section for both men and women. Both the national and area women's associations also used male officials in the roles of handicappers, judges and starters. Although some men continued to express their dislike of women's athletics, as indeed did some women, the support and knowledge they provided was crucial to the development of the sport.

The Situation at the End of the War

While the long-term effects of the First World War on women's employment and social status have been shown to be minimal, less has been written about their experience of sport, either during the war or in the immediate years after its cessation. Some contemporary feminists were in no doubt that, rather than leading to increased opportunities, the inter-war years could witness a return to pre-war attitudes. The fact that the vote had been gained for some women did not mean the struggle was over. Cicely Hamilton, an 'actress, author and former suffragette', argued that

it would be wrong to imagine that we, of the enfranchised twentieth-century, are proof against the danger of a return to femininity ... The crop-haired young women of the present day who array themselves in gym suits, run, jump and swim - they may see their daughters falling over draperies, languishing in flounces or filling up doorways with hoops ... they will have lost the precious right to show their legs! And woman, once more, will be a legless animal - and reduced to the state of independence implied by her unfortunate deformity!¹

However, the war was recognised by two of the most supportive male contemporaries of women's athletics as the catalyst for changing opinions about women and sport. F. A. M. Webster, who wrote a book specifically for female athletes in 1930, was in no doubt that the war was crucial to subsequent developments in women's sport. He argued that 'it showed woman in a new light and caused her to be admitted to spheres of activity undreamed of prior to 1914.'² George Pallett, coach to several female internationals in the post-war period, also felt that women's athletics emerged in Europe because the war had altered people's perceptions about the role of women. Many of the factories had their own sporting associations and 'it seems certain that the women workers of these factories took part in athletic meetings organised to aid various charities.'³

This was indeed the case for the women employed in the munitions and aircraft industries as well as those working for the YMCA. The Aircraft Workers' Sports, held in July 1917, were organised in order to raise funds for the 'YMCA

¹ M. Pugh, Women And The Women's Movement in Britain 1914-1918 (1992), p. 73.

² F.A.M. Webster, Athletics Of To-Day For Women. History, Development And Training (1930), p. 10.

³ G. Pallett, Women's Athletics (Dulwich, 1954), p. 16.

disabled soldiers' and sailors' Hostels and Trade Colonies'. It was sponsored by the News of The World, and included a short sprint for female employees. Sports days were often organised for the benefit of wounded soldiers, as in the case of the Australian Auxiliary Sports held at Harefield in the summer of 1917. Many of the meetings held during the war years were under the auspices of the AAA. The men's governing body was therefore sanctioning women's races before their official recognition of women's athletics in the 1920s.⁴

Reports indicated that some 'ladies' events were exceedingly well supported'.⁵ The programme of the Aircraft Workers Sports showed that there were 159 entered for the women's 60 yards, resulting in thirteen heats before the final. Interestingly, there was no mention of any doubts that women would struggle to run two races close together. The heat was organised for 3.10 in the afternoon, and the final just fifteen minutes later. For the more informal events, ninety-five women were entered for the sack race and 115 in the cigarette race.⁶

Perhaps equally significant was that the women's competition was not seen to be part of the additional 'entertainment', organised alongside the day's sporting events. Pillow fights, relays, boat races and donkey rides provided this. It would appear that the senior female staff had some influence over which events women participated in. The Auxiliary Sports was unusual, in that in addition to the short sprint of 80 yards, it included a 'Throw the Cricket Ball, Circular Skipping and Putting the Weight for the ladies'. In addition, women were included in relay teams competing over half a mile.

⁴ Minutes of the Prize Sub-Committee, 29 Jun. 1917, Sporting Life, 23 Jul. 1917, Flight, 26 Jul. 1917, Red Triangle, 27 Jul. 1917.

⁵ Sporting Life, 23 Jul. 1917. This described the Aircraft Workers Sports, which had a 60 metres sprint for women.

⁶ Aeroplane, 4 Jul. 1917. Cigarette races involved men running to their lady partners, forty yards away. The woman lit the cigarette and the pair ran back to the starting point. These cuttings were all held at the NCAL, Birmingham University.

The team consisted of 'a nurse, YMCA lady, one of staff and one patient, each to run half a lap'.⁷

While the men and women participating no doubt enjoyed the activities, the incentive for organising them was not simply one of fun. In addition to being used to raise funds, sport and the accompanying entertainment was given the important role of raising morale during time of war. In addition, there was also the need to strengthen relationships between employees and employers. Following the Royal Garrison Artillery Sports at Horsham, the Army Commandant was reported as stating, 'that the men were working much better, and were much brighter and were more cheerful for those happy hours.' Presumably, the same could be said about the female employees at the factories.⁸ Both the Sunday Evening Telegraph and the Financial News reported that the Aircraft Workers' Sports of 1917 had, 'the laudable object of cementing l'entente cordiale between employers and employed, a consummation always and greatly to be desired.'⁹ The paternalistic aspect of these sports was apparent from photographs, which show the 'Officers and Ladies' complete in their finery watching male and female workers participating in their working clothes.

The range of athletic events organised for women was far more limited than for the men, and they were largely restricted to 60 or 80 yards running races and the half-mile walk. Despite the fact that they were involved in hard physical labour, there is no record of women participating in the longer races, or that they asked for these events to be included in the programme. The occasions provided a significant number of female employees an opportunity to be involved in their companies' social activities. They participated at the same venue as their fellow male workers and in front of big crowds. The Aircraft Workers Sports was reported to have attracted

⁷ The Red Triangle, 17 Jun. 1917.

⁸ The Red Triangle, 25 May 1917.

⁹ Sunday Evening Telegraph, 15 Jul. 1917, Financial News, 19 Jul. 1917.

'upwards of 4,000', while 3,000 gathered at the Rectory Ground to watch the Crayford Sports.

One of the first recorded female athletic championships was, not surprisingly, that of the Inter-Services, held on the 9 September 1918 at Stamford Bridge. This was a 4x110 yard relay for female members of the armed services. The Women's Royal Air Force team, who recorded a time of 55.2 seconds, won the race. The following year, the first Northern Counties Women's 100 yards Championship was organised. This is believed to be the first women's area championship anywhere in Britain. Elaine Burton, who was one of the first women to wear spikes, won it.¹⁰ Whether this was actually an 'area championship' is uncertain. The women's 100 yards had been included in a Salford Harriers meeting and it is likely that the official title of 'Northern Championships' was chosen to increase interest, rather than the race being sanctioned as a championship by the local men's AAA. Similarly, in 1920, she competed at Neath in what was called 'the World 100 yards Championship for Women.' Burton was again victorious and won in the impressive time of twelve seconds flat.¹¹

Regular notices about women's athletic events appeared in the summer months of 1921. Like the meetings during the war, several men's events incorporated women's sprint races into their programmes. For example, the West End AAA meeting of 1921 included a 75 yards scratch race for women.¹² Subsequent reports told of the success of members from the Harrodian Athletic Association, including Miss Harding, who in front of a crowd of about 2,000 won the women's 75 yards in ten seconds. The same distance was also available at the 1921 Heathfield Sports

¹⁰ Pallett, *Women's Athletics*, p. 17. Elaine Burton was later a Labour Member of Parliament for Coventry.

¹¹ *World Sports*, Jul. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 7, p. 26.

¹² In 'scratch races' all athletes started together as in races today. This meeting was held at Paddington on 12 May 1921.

Association and Kensington Argyll Harriers meeting.¹³ Six women ran 75 yards each to make up a relay distance of 450 yards. The women participating all represented business house clubs from the West End and West London districts. A healthy number of business houses appear to have had women's athletic sections, with ten teams represented on this occasion. A further example of business house sports was provided by the Athletics and Swimming Association Annual Championships in 1922.¹⁴ A women's relay was again included, this time over 440 yards, which was for 'ladies (representing) insurance, offices, banks, business houses and affiliated clubs.'

Several companies offered races in their sports days, and this was undoubtedly how women outside higher education had their first taste of competitive athletics. These meetings remained a vital source of competition during the inter-war years as the number of club matches remained low. In 1923, for example, the Building Trade Sports included a 220 yards handicap for women. In the same year the British Legion Sports, which was the first sports meeting to be held at Wembley, had a women's 880 yards handicap and high jump. Such meetings were not restricted to London. In Birmingham there were regular Charity Sports, as well as meetings organised by the local Post Office, Dunlop and Tram Company. All these meetings offered women competition, as did the popular Lilywhite Sports in Coventry and numerous meetings organised by police forces across the country. The Dunlop sports, which attracted a crowd of 10,000, incorporated an inter-departmental relay for women as well as a '100 yards flat handicap for employees and their daughters'.¹⁵

The Civil Service held an annual national championship and had an active women's athletic section from the twenties. Mary Markey, who worked for them in Coventry, travelled to London for both the track and cross country championships

¹³ Sporting Life, 2 Jun. 1921. The meeting was held at Paddington on 2 May 1921.

¹⁴ Sporting Life, 18 Aug. 1922.

¹⁵ The Times, 6 Aug. 1923, 16 Jul. 1923. Sport and Play, 31 May 1924, p. 14, 28 Jun. 1924, p. 15, 12 Jul. 1924, p. 14, and 9 Jun. 1924, p. 9.

during the thirties.¹⁶ Lyons Athletic Club held regular meetings, as did many insurance companies and Selfridges. The latter was described as having a 'wonderful sports ground'.¹⁷ In 1929, the programme for the Lyons meeting surprisingly included a tug-of-war competition for women, an event certainly not approved of by the WAAA.¹⁸

The business house meetings did not die out after the war but continued to play a vital role in providing competition at grass roots level. As late as the 1950s, Lewis' in Birmingham sent a team to compete in the Inter-Store Championships in Manchester. Norma Blaine recalled the programme was

only like a three-legged race, egg and spoon, sprints and obstacle races. And we used to go, all the stores used to go to Manchester, White City ... We used it to have a day out to Manchester, all the stores ... You know it was just a fun day out.¹⁹

Clearly, when one is calculating the amount of competition available to women in this period, one has to be aware that not all of it was strictly *athletics*, but that some was more of a social occasion. Nevertheless, the role that the business houses played should not be forgotten. In addition to organising matches, companies benefited clubs in their local area by allowing them to use their sports grounds. Morris gave permission for West Bromwich Harriers to use their facilities in 1949 and Coventry Godiva Harriers in the mid-fifties.²⁰ Other major companies that had regular open

¹⁶ Interview with Mary Markey (née Rossi), 10 Mar. 1993.

¹⁷ Interview with Vera Searle (née Palmer), 27 Sept. 1993.

¹⁸ Sporting Life, 3 Aug. 1925, 12 Jul. 1926, and Daily Mirror, 17 Jun. 1929.

¹⁹ Interview with Norma Blaine, 12 May 1993.

²⁰ Coventry Godiva General Committee minutes, 10 Nov. 1954. Information was also drawn from L. Robinson's interview with Beryl Randle, 28 Mar. 1996.

meetings after the Second World War were the General Electrical Company and the National Coal Board. It was crucial that people joined a local club if they wished to continue and improve, as many business houses did not arrange training between the annual championships. Fortunately, there was often an overlap between the membership of clubs and companies in any one area. This was the case at Lewis', where Norma Blaine worked in the bakery. The sports secretary of the firm was Rita Penn, who was a member of Birchfield Harriers. She persuaded Blaine to go down to the club after the inter-departmental sports and subsequently she joined, competing primarily as a walker.²¹

The Development of Women's Athletics in the Educational World

Both the Inter-Varsity Sports and individual university sports days introduced athletics to women in higher education. Manchester University invited teams to compete against them in 1921, and this institution has been credited with initiating women's inter-varsity competition. The meeting was a success, and consequently the advisability of introducing official women's athletics was discussed by the men's governing body, the Inter-Varsity Athletic Board (IVAB). The Board decided that for

all sports except pure athletics, the IVAB shall legislate for women's athletics, and for pure athletics a sub-committee consisting of women students should be appointed.²²

In May 1922, the Birmingham University Sports at Bournville included the half-mile and the 100 yards for women. The competitors represented the faculty in

²¹ Interview with Norma Blaine.

²² R. F. Kerslake, 'University Sport. Sport among Women Students', World Sports, Vol. 6, No. 5, Mar. 1939, p. 163.

which they were studying and the number of events for women increased as the twenties went on. It is interesting to note that both the half-mile and mile were included in women's university athletics from the early twenties. Birmingham University hosted the first IVAB Women's Championships in 1922. Phyllis Hall ran over both the mile and half-mile for Birmingham because 'there was nobody else prepared to run' and she 'was pretty nippy in netball'.²³ The meeting was an undoubted success, a fact that helped to undermine anxiety about female involvement. One commentator admitted that he was

surprised at some of the performances and I confess that some of my prejudice against women taking part in serious racing was removed.²⁴

Support was increased by the absence of distress in any athlete and because 'everything was contested in the best spirit', reducing fears of 'unfeminine' competitiveness. Phyllis Hall won both the longer track distances with no cause for anxiety and Phil Scarlett, who successfully participated in the high jump, 100 yards and relay, 'was as lively at the finish as at the start.'²⁵ A surprisingly full range of events were included, from the 100 yards to the mile on the track, the high and long jumps and the 120 yard hurdles. Noticeably absent were the throwing events, reflecting the lack of encouragement given to these disciplines throughout English athletics. Six universities competed alongside Birmingham: Aberystwyth, Cardiff, Bristol, Nottingham, Leeds and Manchester.

In the same way as a women's association was formed separately from the AAA, the Women's Inter-Varsity Athletic Board (WIVAB) was set up on the advice

²³ Birmingham Mail, 6 May 1922, and interview with Phyllis Hall, 22 Feb. 1993. Please note that walking here means recreational and should not be confused with race walking.

²⁴ Sport and Play, 20 May 1922, p. 18.

²⁵ Op Cit.

of the men's university governing body, which felt the women should have their own organisation. In 1922, a sub-committee was formed by the IVAB to consider whether women's sports should be included in their jurisdiction. Subsequently, in 1923 this committee became the WIVAB. By that time there was

a strong feeling that, as competitors had become keener and the sphere of interest wider, it would be to the advantage of both the women and the men for some central representative body to take over the entire organisation of women's inter-varsity sport.²⁶

Competition expanded throughout the twenties, with the WIVAB organising netball, hockey, swimming, lacrosse and lawn tennis, in addition to athletics. There were three representative track and field matches established by 1939, and often teams competed against area association squads. In 1925, Bangor, Swansea, Reading, and Durham affiliated and by 1939, Exeter, London, Southampton and Edinburgh had added their support. In a move to extend WIVAB influence, 'Associate Membership' was made possible, so those students at Oxford, Cambridge, Dublin, St. Andrews and Trinity could compete in the trials and represent WIVAB teams.²⁷

However, athletics was flourishing in some universities before they joined the WIVAB. In Scotland, for example, Edinburgh included a 100 yards in the 1920 annual sports, along with an inter-faculty relay for women students. By 1928 a relay had been included in the Scottish Inter-University Sports. Edinburgh's main rival, Glasgow University Athletic Club, had a women's section from 1931. The Inter-

²⁶ R. F. Kerslake, 'University Sport. Sport among Women Students', World Sports, Mar. 1939, Vol. 6, No. 5, p. 164.

²⁷ R. F. Kerslake, World Sports, Mar. 1939, p. 164.

University Championships was officially inaugurated in 1933 and teams from Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Glasgow and St. Andrews participated.²⁸

In addition to a few representative matches and the annual inter-varsity competition, the more talented female students had the opportunity to compete at the International Student Games. The standard was not usually as high as in other British teams, so those who struggled to gain a vest sometimes earned one in student sport. Inter-war teams were limited in size because the British student movement could not financially support athletes unable to pay for themselves. After the war this situation improved and teams that were more representative could be selected.

One would not wish to over-emphasise the number of women who were affected by the establishment of women's athletics in the universities. In 1938, only two percent of male and female nineteen-year-olds were in full-time education.²⁹ Very few women attended universities, and of those, an athletics section would have attracted fewer still. In addition, the number of events included in international university competition remained far below that in WAAA sanctioned events. The number of women who competed was small. At the 1951 Luxembourg International Student Games, for example, while fifty-two women entered the athletic events, only four were from Britain.³⁰ Nevertheless, any increase in activity in higher education would mean that some women would join clubs and continue competing after graduation.

²⁸ The points score was as follows: Edinburgh 15, Glasgow 13, Aberdeen 5, St. Andrews 2. They competed in the 100 yards, high jump, broad jump, 220 yards and relay. See Colonel C. Usher (Ed), The Story of Edinburgh University (Edinburgh, 1966), pp. 407-408, and R. Mackenna, Glasgow University Athletic Club The Story of the First Hundred Years (Glasgow, 1981), p. 63.

²⁹ J. Stevenson, British Society 1914-1945 (1984), p. 252.

³⁰ The 4x100m relay team of Q. Shivas, M. Kernonhan, S. Seabourne and V. Ball came 1st. Shivas also won the 100 metres. Athletics Weekly, 8 Sept. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 36, pp. 4-5.

Some women were lucky enough to experience athletics at their schools. The chances of this happening increased after the war, but it would be wrong to assume that no schools offered athletics to their pupils before this time. Vera Searle, who was a school student just before the twenties, did some sprinting in her London school.³¹ Whether students had opportunities in athletics was often determined by the interest of individual teachers. Searle was fortunate to 'have a Headmistress (who) was very keen on honour for the school, everybody had to go in everything'. Searle and her fellow pupils were consequently entered in the West London School Sports. Although she only competed once a year, this raised her interest enough to run in an open race and then join a local club.³²

School athletics did not expand without a certain amount of opposition.³³ Competition was not favoured as it was felt to be contrary to essential femininity. Before discussing the expansion of athletics within the educational world, the reasons for this opposition need to be addressed. The development of women's physical education in England was still very much influenced by the ideology of Per Henrik Ling, whose system of Swedish gymnastics first became popular in the 1830s. Middle-class women were introduced to the exercises by doctors who felt that they could benefit the health of their wealthy clients. As the century progressed, Swedish

³¹ Although Mrs Searle did not indicate which school she attended, it should be noted that her family was middle-class and comfortably off.

³² Interview with Vera Searle.

³³ Opposition within the educational world was not unique to England. The American situation is discussed in detail in chapter three, but it should be noted that such opposition was common throughout Europe. In Poland, for example, where the influence of the Roman Catholic Church also worked against increasing sporting opportunities, a congress was held on women's physical education and sports in 1928. The majority of delegates agreed that women should aim for 'good technical performance and factors relating to beauty', rather than improving records. See A. Guttmann, *Women's Sports. A History* (New York 1991), p. 176. For more detail on other European nations, see Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, pp. 154-157.

gymnastics was also popularised in the London elementary schools, albeit for rather different reasons.³⁴ Ling's theories argued against competition and his supporters occupied an extremely influential role in women's physical education, not only in England but also north America and several parts of Europe. The opposition to competitive track and field was undoubtedly due to the respect with which Ling's ideas were still regarded.

The London School Board was persuaded by Mathias Roth to introduce Ling's system of Swedish gymnastics, and they duly employed Miss Concordia Lofving in 1879, followed by Madame Bergman, later Bergman Österberg, from 1882 to 1887. By the spring of 1882, it was declared that all London elementary schools had trained teachers in Swedish gymnastics. It was clearly an accepted form of exercise for working-class females.

This marked a departure from the 1830s, when, as we have seen, it was a remedial exercise practised by the middle-classes. By the 1860s, it was agreed that in order to safeguard the health of women, and by implication the health of the nation as a whole, it was necessary to balance their academic education with moderate physical exercise. The difference was, however, that while Swedish gymnastics was the only exercise offered for working-class girls in elementary schools, it was just one form of physical activity available to middle-class college students. In addition, while one would not want to argue that there was no concern to improve the health of the working-classes by social reformers in this period, this was not necessarily the primary reason why Swedish gymnastics was advocated by some members of the upper-classes. Jennifer Hargreaves has noted that the concern to control and harness the energy of the working classes was just as high on the agenda.³⁵ Swedish gymnastics was perfect for its time. It did not challenge the aesthetic expectations of

³⁴ J. Hargreaves, Sporting Females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994), pp. 48-49.

³⁵ Hargreaves, Sporting Females, pp. 69-76.

sportswomen, or the accepted degree of physicality that was deemed to be safe. Ling's supporters argued that both the physical and moral well-being of girls would be improved. In addition, in practice it was not dissimilar to military drill, and had the advantage of enabling an instructor to control large groups of girls or young women. It was felt to encourage respect for authority and discipline, develop the ability to follow instructions and promote cleanliness and neatness of appearance.³⁶

The continued influence that Ling's theories enjoyed within the education profession was illustrated in the thirties. The decade witnessed an increase in all physical activities, and although much of this was for rhythmic exercise, athletics benefited from the more sympathetic atmosphere. The need to develop activities for the younger generation also took on more importance, as emphasis was once more placed on the future health of the nation. In 1936, the Physical Education Committee of the British Medical Association reported that there was a 'general neglect of physical deterioration' in both males and females. It was suggested that an improvement to health could be made if school playgrounds were kept open after school.³⁷ Although not a uniform development, every school was expected by 1932 to be teaching 'personal hygiene and personal cleanliness'. In addition, they should be training children 'to like being in the fresh air'.³⁸ Several schools expanded their sporting programmes, but whether athletics was included was still determined by the personal enthusiasm of individual teachers.

Sheila Scraton has argued that physical education policy in the thirties was influenced by Principles of Gymnastics for Women and Girls.³⁹ This text, written by

³⁶ Hargreaves, Sporting Females, pp. 69-76 and Guttmann, Women's Sports, p. 94.

³⁷ World Sports, Sept. 1936, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 213.

³⁸ Times Education Supplement, 10 Dec. 1932.

³⁹ S. Scraton, Shaping Up To Womanhood, (Buckingham 1992) pp. 38-41. She points out that E. Bjorksten, Gymnastics For Women and Girls was published in 1918 but not translated into English until 1932.

a woman, reiterated the arguments about the dangers of ‘muscular power’ because ‘women are, in almost every respect inferior’. Athletics, which was deemed a far more physically demanding sport, was unlikely to be fully accepted by a teaching profession dominated by these beliefs. Therefore, the availability of a local club was undoubtedly crucial if many young women were to discover athletics. Even after 1944, when the Butler Act established secondary education for all, facilities and the quality of coaching within schools limited the effect it had on track and field. This was an era where women’s domestic role was emphasised, not least by the Beveridge Report in 1942. As Scraton has indicated, concern over the falling birth rate intensified the sense of urgency that girls needed to ‘relearn the graces, which so many have forgotten in the last thirty years’. The ‘natural’ differences between men and women were emphasised rather than a similarity of roles.

Gradually, however, women’s desire to take part in more physical activities and the growing proof that they could safely participate in sport, did begin to challenge the ruling class hegemony. As always the process was gradual rather than dramatic, and the emphasis remained very much on moderation. In 1937, the Board of Education published Recreation and Physical Fitness For Girls And Women in response to

an obvious need, for it is particularly amongst girls and women that demand for social and recreative physical activities has been most apparent during the last few years. "Keep Fit" classes are multiplying, and girls and women are showing themselves to be as enthusiastic as their brothers and husbands for open-air games and pastimes, where the opportunity is given them to take part.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In the foreword written by Arthur S. McNalty, the Chief Medical Officer.

Much of the general training followed the advice given in the 1933 syllabus of physical training, but this was the first time advice had been aimed exclusively at 'those working with mostly working girls and women.' Female doctors were involved in deciding on the content and clear links were made, as they had been in the past, between a healthy mind and healthy body.

By no means against athletics for women and girls, the Board of Education did advise caution, pointing out in 1937 that a

difference of opinion exists regarding the suitability of some of these events, such as the 220 yards, the quarter-mile, the half-mile and possibly the running long jump. All these, as well as the mile and cross country running, must be regarded as strenuous events and suitable only for those whose training has adequately prepared them for the excessive expenditure of energy and continuity of effort that these events demand.⁴¹

The throwing events were supported, especially for girls who were not suited to running or jumping. Unfortunately, far less instruction was provided, perhaps because more practice was required, an unlikely possibility in the limited physical education programmes implemented by most schools. The continued reluctance to encourage women's athletics unambiguously was remarkably durable in education, even in the face of ever-increasing proof that the sport was not harming women who participated. In 1951, the Schools Athletic Association (SAA), was still not recommending races over 150 metres for girls. In addition, cross country was not organised for either boys or girls in the state section, although it was part of the curriculum in many grammar schools. The throwing events caused some anxiety, but as long as staff introduced them gradually, discus and javelin were considered safe. The shot putt, however,

⁴¹ Recreation and Physical Fitness for Girls and Women (1937), p. 243 and p. 252.

remained off the programme until 1962.⁴² Long jump was rejected as unsuitable for girls and women,⁴³ due to fears about impact injuries and possible displacement of their internal organs. Two years later, in 1953, the women's 150 yards was finally replaced by a 220 yards, to bring it in line with the standard distance in club competition. Athletic correspondents felt that this was a 'step in the right direction' especially as it strengthened links with the WAAA. A closer relationship was felt to be necessary, to ensure that competition distances and the weight of throwing implements was consistent. This was important if girls were to continue their athletics after they left school and begin to participate in competition under the auspices of the WAAA.⁴⁴ One cannot criticise the SAA for their concern about girls' health, but their reluctance to expand their programme created obstacles for promising youngsters and denied those who were suited to longer distances a competitive opportunity.⁴⁵

Any analysis of the extent of schools athletics for girls would be incomplete without a brief look at the central part of the SAA programme, the English Schools Championships.⁴⁶ In London, boy's athletic competitions were organised by the London School Athletic Association. (LSAA) from 1900. The first time girls were involved was in 1921, which was not entirely surprising, as this was the year that women's athletics began to be reported in national newspapers. In the light of continued caution about women's participation, one would not have been surprised if their presence had been delayed for some time. As it was, they were restricted to a 100 yards and relay. Girls were also included in some county school competitions

⁴² This was after a proposal was turned down in 1953.

⁴³ Athletics Weekly, 13 Jan. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 45, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Letter from Mr A. Sanderson, Athletics Weekly, 20 Oct. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 42, p. 4.

⁴⁵ 880 yards was not included for senior girls (15-17 years old) until 1955.

⁴⁶ This was known simply as the Inter-County Championships until 1961.

from 1922 and the inaugural SAA Championships in September 1925.⁴⁷ The SAA activities introduced top quality competition for school aged girls as well as boys. Trials were held at district and county levels and these events catered for a larger number of young athletes.

David Young has noted somewhat surprisingly that 'there was no discussion about the inclusion of girl's events', and consequently the 100 and 150 yards, high and long jumps, hurdles, and relay were in the first SAA Championships. Although there were no reports of any cause for alarm, opposition was predictably expressed by both the Ling Association and Headmistresses' Association. The general disapproval within the education profession culminated in a resolution that the SAA should not encourage girls to participate in their championships. The risk of injury to the supposedly more fragile bodies of girls, together with anxiety that they would overstrain themselves were the main complaints. In addition, a competitive atmosphere was felt to be detrimental to girls' feminine development. Not all the advice was negative. A good standard of toilet facilities was demanded in addition to a safe landing area for the high jump.⁴⁸

In the fifties, individual schools began to introduce more structured athletic programmes, although this was not always due to the physical education teachers. Hamble School began an athletics programme in 1951, when an AAA honorary coach joined the school and with the physical education staff, implemented coaching for both boys and girls. The school went on to compete in Eastleigh and Hampshire school matches with the emphasis on team spirit. To help encourage involvement

⁴⁷ D. Young, 'The History Of The English Schools' Athletic Association 1925-1980' (MA thesis, University of Manchester, 1981), pp. 26-27. The Middlesex County Championships was held on 13 Jul. 1922.

⁴⁸ Young 'The History Of The English Schools', pp. 44-46 and p. 13.

once they left school, an athletics section was started at an associated youth club.⁴⁹ Reports on similar schools underlined the fact that it was only in the last few years that more schools were taking up athletics and had moved on from the "egg and spoon era."⁵⁰ As late as 1966, it was acknowledged that although schoolgirl athletics had been getting increasingly popular for a decade, and

in most schools it is now possible for girls to "have a go" at athletics ... too often it is still a case of a short period of practice before a "sports day" or special coaching for those girls with obvious physical skill. In either case, many girls are left out.⁵¹

During the inter-war years, schools were seen as the 'nursery, not only for our Olympic talent, but also for the cultivation of young girl athletes to represent us in the Women's World's Games and other international contests.'⁵² As the championships became established and more schools became involved, evidence increased that the SAA was indeed grooming future national and international standard athletes. Sheila Alexander, who became an Olympic medallist in the high jump, experienced no athletics at her state school.⁵³ However, she was increasingly in a minority among the

⁴⁹ Athletics Weekly, 23 Jan. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 4, p. 4. The report does not say what he taught except that it was not physical education.

⁵⁰ Athletics Weekly, 3 Apr. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 14, pp. 6-7.

⁵¹ P. Woodeson and D. Watts, Schoolgirl Athletics (1966), in foreword, no exact page given.

⁵² British Olympic Journal, Oct. 1933, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 17.

⁵³ Very little information is provided about the type of schools athletes attended. It is usually simply written that they started at athletics while at school. None of the women interviewed in Athletics Weekly attended a club at their school but, instead, trained with a local club. For example, see 'June Paul (Spartan LAC) answers the Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 27 Oct. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 43, pp. 10-11. 'Phyllis Perkins (Ilford LAC) answers the Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 24 Nov. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 47, pp. 10-12. 'Shirley Burgess (Woolwich Polytechnic) answers the

women interviewed by Athletics Weekly during the fifties. From the late forties, more and more future athletes had been introduced to athletics at their schools. In most cases, however, athletics is simply participated in once a year in the annual sports day. Nevertheless, the experience did lead some women to join their local club. Enid Harding, for example, participated in the high jump at her annual school sports day at Drayton Manor Grammar School. In January 1950, she joined London Olympiades and began competing in the 880 yards, mile and cross country.⁵⁴ In 1958, twelve women who were selected to compete in the Commonwealth or European Championships had competed in SAA Championships, showing how important the school competition was. Grass root participants were not interviewed but the comments made by their better-known sisters reflected the general trend throughout the education system.

Club Life and Domestic Competition

George Pallett has argued that 'the first trace of organised women's athletics in England seems to have been the formation of a ladies' section attached to Kensington Athletic Club in 1921'.⁵⁵ One well-known early member was Sophie Elliott-Lynn. She competed in the first women's international held in Monte Carlo in 1921 and, as we have seen, held secretarial and vice-presidential positions in the WAAA. Mr E. H. Knowles, who was closely involved in the formation of the

Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 22 Jan. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 6-9. 'Heather Armitage (Longwood Harriers) Answers the AW Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 4 Oct. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 40, pp. 6-7. 'Dorothy Hall Answers the AW Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 24 Nov. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 47, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁴ 'Enid Harding answers the AW Questionnaire', Athletics Weekly, 2 Aug. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 31, pp. 14-15.

⁵⁵ Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 114.

national WAAA, encouraged the formation of Kensington Ladies' Section. Knowles was quickly established as a well-known and respected official and coach within women's athletics. Most of the women who joined were from the Borough Polytechnic in London. The influence of 'Teddy' Knowles was not restricted to Kensington Athletic Club. He was also credited with setting up the exclusively female Middlesex Ladies Athletic Club, and after a disagreement with officials there in 1930, he formed Spartan Ladies Athletic Club.⁵⁶

The inaugural meeting of Spartan LAC agreed that the club should be called Southern Ladies' Athletic Club. This name was rejected, however, when they applied for WAAA affiliation later that year. The General Committee argued that it would cause confusion, presumably with the Southern Counties Women's Amateur Athletic Association. In response, the club decided to retain its original initials and adopted Spartan LAC as its name. Club colours were a white vest and scarlet shorts that had a two-inch stripe. This was a departure from most clubs, which wore more muted colours, usually the black shorts decreed as being the most respectable by the WAAA.⁵⁷

Several of the early clubs were created from members of those already established. Middlesex LAC mainly consisted of former members of Kensington, and in 1923 six members of Eastern LAC approached a local athletic supporter, Mr Rainbow, asking him to form a new club for them. This club was known as Manor Park Ladies until November 1934, when it was decided at the AGM to rename it Essex Ladies.⁵⁸ The practice of athletes moving to other clubs, which they thought might serve them better, became more common as the choice in a local area increased. Although Mary French remained a member of Birchfield Harriers Ladies

⁵⁶ Interview with Sylvia Disley (née Cheeseman), 19 Jul. 1995. See also Pallett, Women's Athletics, pp. 114-115 and p. 122. Athletic Club is abbreviated to AC and Ladies Athletic Club to LAC.

⁵⁷ Athletics, Apr. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 17, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁸ J. Audsley, 'Athletic Clubs of Britain', Athletics Weekly, 24 Mar. 1951, Vol. 6, No. 12, p. 5.

Section (BHLS), she was unhappy with their version of cross country runs that consisted of laps around the perimeter of their training ground. Her desire for runs over *real* country courses motivated her, together with a close friend, to establish a club in the area where they lived. They formed a ladies' section of the men's West Bromwich Harriers, helped by several male members.⁵⁹

Far more information is available for London Olympiades, which was founded by several of the Regent Street Polytechnic students who had attended the first women's Monte Carlo international the previous Easter.⁶⁰ However, F.A.M. Webster indicated that Kensington was not formed until 1922, which, would therefore make London Olympiades Athletic Club (LOAC) founded in 1921, the first women's club.⁶¹ It is an interesting fact that while athletics, both during the war and in earlier centuries, had been participated in by working-class women, the first females to be involved in organised track and field in the twentieth century were largely drawn from the socially elite sector of educated women. One history of the London Olympiades Athletic Club stated that it 'has the distinction of having won its first victories far away in Monte Carlo before the club ever existed officially.' Mr Joe Palmer, who had trained the team and who had accompanied the women to France, suggested while the athletes were on the return train journey to England that a club should be formed. London Olympiades initially had ten members, the name chosen aptly describing the women's home location and recent experience in what was described as a women's Olympiad.⁶²

LOAC was well organised and very successful. It is also one of the few women's clubs that has available committee minutes although these, unfortunately,

⁵⁹ Personal correspondence from Mary Bartlett (nee French), received 29 Jan. 1993.

⁶⁰ For more information about this international, see chapter three.

⁶¹ Webster, *Athletics of To-Day For Women*, p. 39.

⁶² J. Audsley, 'Athletics Clubs of Britain', *Athletics Weekly*, 21 Oct. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 42, p. 14.

Detail on this competition is in chapter three.

date from 1924 rather than the inaugural year of 1921. The early years of the club's history reveal that it was undoubtedly the pioneering club, making several trips to compete in Europe. A week after the First Women's Olympic Games had been held in August 1922, London Olympiades travelled to Brussels where they competed against Femina Sports Club of Brussels and the Paris Club Femina AC. The eight-event match, which was held at the Stade du Parc, Duden, was totally dominated by LOAC members. The performances of Misses Birchenough, Callebout, Hatt and Lowman were particularly significant, for between them they gained seven victories and placed second in four events. The English women also established three Belgian records, which at this time described the best performances set in Belgium.⁶³ The club's trips abroad were unique in British women's athletics at this time. In August of 1923 London Olympiades visited Brussels and Antwerp, winning on both occasions.⁶⁴ The following year saw London Olympiades competing again in Brussels. They retained their over-all supremacy, winning seven out of the nine events and gaining four second and three third places.⁶⁵

The importance of London Olympiades within the history of British women's athletics should not be underestimated. Not only were several members responsible for the forming of the WAAA, but they also established well-organised female competition in their local area. The club did not restrict their influence to overseas or

⁶³ Nora Callebout gained two of these on the track, in the 80 metres (10.6 seconds) and 300 metres (45.4 seconds). In the field events, Florence Birchenough increased the shot-putt record to 29 foot 9½ inches.

⁶⁴ The dominance of the team was significantly aided by the talented Mary Lines who gained five victories in both matches. In the Antwerp meeting, she also created a new world record for the 250 metres with a time of 35 3/5 seconds. This was not to last long as the future WAAA honorary secretary, Vera Searle (née Palmer), bettered it by a further 1/5 of a second later in 1923.

⁶⁵ Sporting Life, 18 Aug. 1922. Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 115 and Webster, Athletics Of To-Day, p. 43 and p. 52 also gives details of both these matches.

elite events and on 18 July 1922 held its first evening meeting at Paddington Recreation Ground.⁶⁶ The event was deemed a success and they were held regularly throughout the inter-war years. A full-range of track and field events were included in the two or three meetings organised each season. Standing long jump and high jump was organised alongside today's version of these events, in which athletes use a running take-off. Longer track events were offered from the first meeting so that the range of events included in contemporary championships were available. The inaugural programme included the 'Championship of England 440 yards', a race that was headed by LOAC member Mary Lines, 'Olympic Champion'.⁶⁷ The aim of these matches was to try to improve the standard of women's athletics in the area. The club continued to pioneer women's competition and in 1932 they held the first women's mile handicap at their Battersea Park Sports. The race was sanctioned by the WAAA and marked a change in attitude towards the longer event.⁶⁸

In contrast to the clubs that catered for women only, several well-established men's athletic clubs developed 'ladies' sections'. As we have seen, the first of these was Kensington LAC. This type of club had the advantage that the female members were able to use the facilities already available to the men. In contrast to London Olympiades, BHLS members did not have to worry about finding a track and changing facilities each year. In practice, most of the men's and women's sections were run entirely separately. Nevertheless, male members were often involved in helping to found the women's clubs, coach their members and officiate at their meetings. This was the case at Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section, which was the

⁶⁶ Sporting Life, 18 Aug. 1922.

⁶⁷ In an illustration of Lyons support of women's athletics, the company directors presented 'The Lyons Perpetual Cup' for this championship two years later in 1924. Vera Searle (née Palmer) won this for the first three years.

⁶⁸ The Times, 22 Aug. 1932.

biggest and most influential club in midland women's athletics. It retains this position today, helped by excellent facilities and sponsorship.

BHLS was founded in 1921. The annual general meeting of that year records that, 'The Ladies Section (had) completed their first season's work, much progress being made and great promise for the future shown.' When they affiliated to the WAAA in 1923 their membership stood at twenty 'lady members', but by 1947 they had ninety-six.⁶⁹ With the loss of the early women's committee minutes the precise reasons for the formation of the women's club is unknown. However, it was reported that, 'The ladies' section of this famous club originated from a cross country run from a member's house in 1921.' Further praise of the women's progress was made at the following year's AGM when it was noted that the section had 'won prizes and relay races in all parts of the country.' In the winter season of 1923-24, the women's activities were extended with their first cross country race organised at Perry Barr. The club was also represented at the first WAAA Track and Field Championships in 1923. Phyllis Hall, who as we have seen was one of their earliest members and first international athlete, ran in the 880 yards. Junior athletes, who were defined as being less than fifteen years of age, were admitted as members just before the Second World War. The club subsequently reported in 1947, that they 'find this an excellent way of strengthening the Senior ranks of the future.'⁷⁰

The all-round strength of Birchfield was temporarily challenged by Westbury Harriers Ladies Section after they were founded in April 1928, and by the establishment of Birmingham Atlanta after 1939. Westbury's reputation was strongest in cross country and road walking. They inflicted the first ever defeat on Middlesex LAC and won the national cross country title in 1930, the first year they entered a

⁶⁹ BHLS Affiliation Papers to the WAAA. See appendix number 1, pp. 365- 366, which provides a copy of the affiliation papers.

⁷⁰ *Athletics*, May 1947, Vol. 3, No. 18, pp. 18-19. See also Professor W. Alexander and W. Morgan, *The History of Birchfield Harriers 1887-1988* (1988), pp. 24-25.

team.⁷¹ In the early thirties, Birchfield invited Westbury to an inter-club cross country at Perry Barr and this led to a return match at Bristol. Both clubs had the satisfaction of winning on home ground.⁷² Westbury continued to win several area and national titles until the outbreak of the Second World War, after which they struggled to repeat their earlier success. It was not until 1957 that they managed a return to pre-war form, when several of their athletes placed well in the MCWAAA Novice, Senior and Junior Cross Country Championships.

A third midland club that showed early promise was Coventry Godiva Harriers Ladies Section. Not only does Coventry Godiva provide an example of a successful early club, but it also reveals how the lack of club archives can mislead club officials over when women began competing in their area.⁷³ Unlike the larger clubs, Coventry did not significantly increase the number of female members during the thirties, and ceased to exist in December 1938.⁷⁴ While several business house clubs closed in 1939, due to the outbreak of war, Coventry suffered because the women's section was not well catered for. The number of women involved during the thirties remained static, at between about eight and twelve.

Wherever a club was based and regardless of whether it catered solely for women or not, the influence of men in the development of women's grass roots athletics cannot be denied. Most of the men were previously involved with men's athletics, either as athletes or AAA officials. At London Olympiades Athletic Club,

⁷¹ P. Griffin, Westbury Harriers. The Golden Years of Pari-Passu. 1924-1984 (1984), p. 13.

⁷² Interview with Mary Bartlett, 17 Feb. 1993.

⁷³ Present-day officials were adamant that the women's section was not formed until after the Second World War. Evidence to the contrary was found in contemporary race results, which listed a Coventry Godiva women's team on several occasions. Mary Markey, who was listed in race results under her maiden name of Rossi, was interviewed and was also remembered by one of her rivals, Mary Bartlett.

⁷⁴ Midland Counties WAAA committee minutes, Mar. 1940.

one male name stands out above all others as being the single most influential person. Joe Palmer was not only a founder member, as we have already seen, but was also responsible for helping to run the club on a day to day basis for years afterwards. He held the position of secretary and treasurer at various times, and in addition to his committee work he gave financial donations to the club, offered prizes for club championships and provided medals. In 1925, the committee put on record

the valuable support Mr Palmer gave to the Club. He was down at the training ground every night, except when business took him to the other side of England and was always ready with advice and practical help.

The minutes contain references to several male coaches, particularly a Mr Turner, who was recognised as playing a central role in the club's success during the mid-twenties. In 1935, LOAC had three male coaches compared to one woman. It was not only in coaching that men played important roles. In addition to Mr Palmer, several men sat on the committee while others were patrons and provided vital financial help. The number of men involved should not be exaggerated; they were in the minority. Nevertheless, several of them held more than one position within a club's administration. Mr Palmer was a prime example of this, as was Dr Harris. The latter was not only a coach but also an LOAC delegate to the SCWAAA and the national WAAA, as well as Chairman during the early 1930s.⁷⁵

London Olympiades was not unique in this, although Joe Palmer does seem to have been involved longer than most! W.W. Alexander was BHLS' first coach and

⁷⁵ LOAC committee minutes, 14 Jan. 1928. Major Hilary Taylor was reported to be very interested in the club and willing to help with donations. He was voted a vice-president at this meeting. See also, 2 Dec. 1925, 12 Jan. 1927, 16 Oct. 1935, 17 Oct. 1933 and 16 Dec. 1932. The president of the club during the 1930s was also a man, but this was only after Dr. Skaife's wife died. He then agreed to take over her position. See also, LOAC committee minutes, 13 Dec. 1929.

'steered them through the stormy days when women's athletics were frowned upon.'⁷⁶

A similar situation existed at Westbury, where the founder of the men's section, Gilbert Walker, was also credited with being vital to the success of the female athletes.⁷⁷ There was a strong male influence at Birmingham Atlanta, which had an exclusively female membership until 1951. Gordon Baragwanath and Charlie Lewis founded the club. Neither was just a figurehead, with Baragwanath an active committee member and president. It was Lewis, however, who was behind the success of the club. Potential members were recruited from local races, a common practice according to one of his athletes, Beryl Randle. She recalled that

there was a lot of open meetings years ago, a lot of handicap events, track events, and the coach would go along with his girls, but if he spotted somebody who was not in a club colour, a lot of coaches would do it, you know go along like he did, "Are you interested? Come and join us" and that is where they picked up a lot of their athletes.⁷⁸

The problem was that having one person so influential, meant that if they left, clubs often fell apart. When Charlie Lewis moved to Blackpool in the early fifties, the heart was removed from Birmingham Atlanta. Several of his athletes moved clubs to find other coaches, officials began to leave, and as Charlie had been 'the one with all the drive and enthusiasm ... it just fell apart'.⁷⁹ The number of clubs that closed, or merged after the first few years of enthusiasm, also reflected the lack of depth in women's athletics. In 1938, the MCWAAA reported that 'Katcee LAC' had lost their

⁷⁶ *Athletics*, May 1947, Vol. 3, No. 18, pp. 18-19.

⁷⁷ Griffin, *Westbury Harriers*, p. 16.

⁷⁸ Interview with Beryl Randle.

⁷⁹ Interview with Beryl Randle.

trainer in a car accident and 'could not keep together without him.'⁸⁰ The development of the sport depended on a small number of dedicated individuals. Some athletes were asked by their local club to join them after they heard of their talent. Mitcham LAC offered Dorothy Odam (later Tyler) a scholarship that paid her first year's membership.⁸¹ June Foulds, who became an international sprinter, was recruited by Mrs Evelyn Horwick of Spartan LAC who

cycled round the roads near her home asking the children at play in the streets if they knew any girls who could run and would like to join this famous London club. The children knew June could run ... and they said so. June duly became a member of the club.⁸²

In later years, the good standard of facilities at BHLS attracted athletes but this was not the reason why the club has such a history of consistent success. Former members explained that it was the presence of Nelson-Neal who

was an excellent coach ... She was a good coach but you did as you were told or you were in trouble! That sounds awful, but I held (her) as a god-like figure. I mean, if she said to me "Go out and do twelve laps" I'd go out and do it quite happily because she'd never failed me, and whereas other people might skip training I never did ...⁸³

A club's social activities were also an important part of its attraction. London Olympiades and BHLS held regular dances. Winnie Haywood worked for the same

⁸⁰ MCWAAA committee minutes, May 1938.

⁸¹ World Sports, Mar. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 38.

⁸² Daily Mirror, 12 Jun. 1950.

⁸³ Interview with Beryl Randle.

company as Jack Bartlett during the 1930s. She had always been interested in running but did not know how to become involved. Jack encouraged Winnie to go to a Birchfield dance and after that she decided to join.⁸⁴ Smaller clubs, which did not have the money or were not so well organised, often lacked committee members willing to arrange social activities and failed to hold regular social events. This has been held partly responsible for the small female membership at some clubs.⁸⁵ In later years single-sex clubs, such as London Olympiades, held their dances with mixed or men's clubs. The majority of interested women simply joined their local club because it was the nearest and the only one they had heard of. Only the biggest and most successful clubs would have attracted athletes from outside their own area. Clubs generally represented their local district. London Olympiades was unique in women's athletics in that it had several training bases. This probably dated from the time when there were few clubs in the area catering for women. Rather than setting up a separate club, a branch of LOAC was organised instead.

In clubs with few female members, a coach was much rarer. At Coventry Godiva, contemporary male athletes gave the women advice about training.⁸⁶ When the women's section was re-established in 1948, attitudes had changed, and although still small, it was better organised. As at the majority of clubs, sprinting was the most popular discipline for women and by the fifties Norman Walker had become a sprint coach. He was to become a stalwart of Coventry Godiva women's section and Warwickshire County WAAA. A middle-distance athlete himself, he turned to women's athletics largely because his efforts to become involved in the men's section

⁸⁴ Interview with Winnie Haywood, 9 May 1994.

⁸⁵ A. Drake, 'From Factory Sports To Lycra Shorts: the post-war experience of the Harriers Athletic Club', paper given at a conference on 'The Future of Track and Field Athletics', Sept. 1995, University of Warwick. Published in *Working Papers in Sport and Society*, Vol. 4. 1995/6 Warwick University, Centre for the Study of Sport in Society, 1996.

⁸⁶ Interview with Mary Markey.

were continually frustrated. As they already had an established group as committee members and coaches it was hard for a younger man to be accepted. Instead, he became the coach of the growing female section and in later years was made chairman, a position he retained until his retirement in the 1990s.⁸⁷ The influence of men did not always remain as strong. While Birchfield's men and women shared facilities and the women's section was discussed at the men's annual general meeting, the influence of men declined as the years went on. By 1947, BHLS had an all women committee.⁸⁸ They also led the way in encouraging former members to become officials and coaches once they stopped competing. By the time Diane Leather joined the club, in 1952, Birchfield had more female coaches than male in the women's section.⁸⁹

Men also influenced women's athletics in their role of father, brother and boyfriend. The necessary approval of one's father was a common theme expressed by several women, particularly those who competed before the Second World War. Some recalled that their mothers and grandmothers were unhappy about girls being involved in athletics, mainly because they themselves had never taken part in the sport. In addition, they were anxious about possible health risks, and were concerned about women wearing shorts in public.⁹⁰ The support of fathers, then, was all the more important. Few children would have gone against the wishes of both their parents. Women who became involved in athletics were often brought up in families where physical exercise in general was encouraged. Phyllis Hall had support from both her parents, who regularly watched her races. Her father, who had been a

⁸⁷ Interview with Norman Walker, 10 May 1994.

⁸⁸ Athletics Weekly, May 1947, Vol. 3, No. 18, p. 19.

⁸⁹ Ex-athletes at Birchfield who had taken coaching awards by 1952 were Misses A. Fenn, A. Poet, M. Chadwick and Nelson-Neal who had a WAAA senior coaching badge. BHLS AGM minutes, 1952.

⁹⁰ Interviews with Mary Markey, Winnie Haywood and Audrey Court (née Brown) 29 Jun. 1993.

gymnast, encouraged all three of his children to take long walks and generally keep fit.⁹¹ This experience was a common one among other female athletes. Both Winnie Haywood and Mary French, who competed for Birchfield Harriers in the thirties and forties, agreed that the fact that their fathers were keen on sport allowed them to develop a similar interest. Both men felt that sport was character building and was as beneficial for girls as much as boys. In addition to taking long walks on Sunday, Mary and her father cycled and played tennis together. After she did well at the annual West Bromwich sports day, her father wrote to the secretary at Birchfield Harriers to see if his daughter could join.⁹²

Some fathers took a more active role in their daughter's athletics. After accompanying them to training and races, many became involved in coaching. The father of Elaine Burton provides an early example. He was a former Olympic athlete who came fourth in the 400 metre hurdles final in 1908. He went on to become a well-known coach of female athletes and was responsible for his daughter's interest in several sports. In the case of Betty Loakes, her brother-in-law encouraged her to join his club Ketteringham Harriers in Leicestershire. He coached her first in the sprints and later over 800 metres at which she gained international selection in the fifties. It was also common for athletes to follow their father's example. Beryl Randle's father was a former Birchfield Harrier and while he did not advise her on training, he actively supported her walking career. Irene Upton, who was one of Westbury Harriers successful athletes in the early thirties, was the daughter of a former Bristol runner who had become an official for women's athletics. This pattern continued as

⁹¹ It is worth noting, that in Alexander and Morgan, The History of Birchfield Harriers, it says that Phyllis Hall's father helped to form Birchfield Harriers itself. This was disputed by Phyllis Hall during L. Robinson's interview.

⁹² Interviews with Winnie Haywood and Mary Bartlett.

women's involvement became more common. In 1954, Judy Pridie emulated her father when she won the first ever women's national field title for Westbury.⁹³

Mary French was one of the few women before the Second World War, who continued to run after marrying and having a family.⁹⁴ She was not alone, however, and the number of married women competing in this period has probably been underestimated. It has been reported, for instance, that in the 1932 National Junior Cross Country Championships in Croydon, one competitor was forty-seven years old and had six children.⁹⁵ Women who managed to combine their sporting and domestic lives had to have the support of their husbands. Vera Searle, who competed in the early twenties, was encouraged to enter a race at the local Lyons' sports by both her father and husband-to-be after showing promise at school. However, once married her husband thought she should stop running and Vera was forced to retire from competition, despite having reached international standard. She did remain a long-time administrator of the WAAA, although this was not always welcomed, as her husband 'couldn't always accept the fact that she was so involved.'⁹⁶ Many female athletes denied that they had felt this was particularly unfair, as the perception of women was 'still (that) the woman's place was in the home'. Just as they gave up their jobs, they gave up their sport and most did not question it.⁹⁷

In contrast to Vera Searle, Mary (French) Bartlett's husband Jack, whom she met at Birchfield Harriers, actively supported her athletics. He dismissed the warnings of his fellow athletes that Mary would be unable to have children. Nevertheless, in order to alleviate Jack's anxiety, she underwent a medical

⁹³ Griffin, *Westbury Harriers*, p. 18, p. 35 and p. 31. Pridie won the shot putt national field title, and in the early 1960s, the daughter of their founder, Gilbert Walker, represented the club.

⁹⁴ Her married name was Bartlett.

⁹⁵ E. F. de Roeck, *A History of Rotherham Harriers and Athletics Club 1887-1987* (1987), p. 68.

⁹⁶ Interview with Vera Searle and Marea Hartman, 13 May 1993.

⁹⁷ Interview with Audrey Court.

examination by her local doctor before starting to train again after having her children, and then repeatedly every six months. Despite the fact that it was unusual for a woman to run seriously after having a family, Mary was persuaded by BHLS to return, as they needed women members to help re-establish the section after the Second World War. Mary and Jack trained together over cross country in this period, and she represented England in three international cross-countries to add to her two before she was married.⁹⁸

As women's athletics became more common, a greater number of women did continue to train and compete after marriage, although it was still unusual in the fifties and sixties for women at grass roots to return to the sport. Consequently, as we have seen, the sport found it difficult to recruit female officials and coaches. Only recently has it become the norm for women to return to athletics after having children. It was not only social attitudes that failed to encourage them, but also lack of time and energy. Housework was hard and even in cases where husbands did not oppose their wives' sporting interests, the reality of looking after a home and family meant that most women found it impossible.

Traditionally, then, athletics was a young woman's sport and was participated in for a relatively short time. This was particularly true for sprinters in the first few decades after the Second World War. Women were not expected to have as long athletic careers as their male contemporaries, for both social and physical reasons. However, they were expected to fulfil their potential at a much earlier age.⁹⁹ International teams frequently contained teenagers, including some still at school. These were often the athletes to set new national records, something that is very rare in the 1990s. Nevertheless, social attitudes, which had worked against women participating after marrying and having children, became less credible as more

⁹⁸ Interview with Mary Bartlett.

⁹⁹ J. Crump, Play the Game, undated pamphlet in The National Collection for Athletics Literature, Birmingham University.

women entered the labour force. There was no evidence in either the specialist or general press to suggest opposition to older women competing. In the early years this was probably due to the fact that so few did. After the war when greater numbers began to return, there was still no cry of outrage and a few were singled out for particular praise:

At the Southern Women's Championships at Chiswick last Saturday the show was stolen by that athletic marvel, Lily Chalmers, who, at the age of forty-two is still one of Britain's fastest women sprinters ... I'm told she's quite an inspiration to her club and I can well believe it.¹⁰⁰

Although no doubt partly a reflection of a more outspoken press, reports during the fifties mentioned more cases of male and female athletes having relationships. Some felt that several girls got involved because they saw their boyfriends competing and decided to have a go themselves. Not all friendships were without their controversies. Athletics Weekly reported in 1956, that although

boy and girl friends in athletics are becoming a popular phrase just now ... they will only remain so if the other partner does not interfere with the proceedings should any incident occur concerning his or her event.¹⁰¹

The article referred to two well-known athletes, Madeleine Wooller, and Derek Ibbotson. In the half-mile Madeleine clashed with another athlete, and was disqualified. It was a decision that infuriated Ibbotson, who stormed onto the track and had to be warned that he 'would be summarily ejected from the ground ... (by)

¹⁰⁰ Athletics Weekly, 19 Mar. 1954, Vol. 9, No. 12, p. 12.

¹⁰¹ 14 Jul. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 28, p. 11.

Chief Supt. Saxton'. Fortunately most complaints about the influence of boyfriends were of a less inflammatory nature, although potentially more worrying. Some clubs reported in the fifties that they found it difficult to keep their female athletes interested once they reached their late teenage years. This was usually because they 'found a boy friend outside the club'.¹⁰² The track secretary of the all-women's club Selsonia LAC also highlighted the situation. She wrote in Athletics Weekly that even after they had 'persuaded Mum and Dad that athletics will not harm her, a girl then has to face the derision of any boy friend she may have, who treats the whole matter as a huge joke.'¹⁰³

For some of the higher ranked athletes, the solution was not to have a boyfriend until their competitive career was over. Dorothy Hyman, a double medallist at the Rome Olympics of 1960, wrote in 1964 that she had been running since she was thirteen, and ten years later had not had a boyfriend. She questioned what boy would want

a girlfriend who just about every evening of her life comes home from work, then goes training ... a girl who is running or training, come winter, come summer, every Saturday or Sunday?¹⁰⁴

The competitive side of races cannot be doubted and all the women athletes interviewed, who competed both before and after the Second World War, emphasised that they were as serious about their performances as athletes are today. However, they argued that this was combined within a healthier and more relaxed atmosphere. For instance, in 1956 the SCWAAA Inter-County Championships was described as

¹⁰² Modern Athletics, Jun. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 11.

¹⁰³ Letter from C. Brett, 'Women in Athletics', Athletics Weekly, 21 Jan. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 3, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ D. Hyman, Sprint To Fame (1964), p. 11. See chapter five for more on Dorothy Hyman.

having a 'garden party atmosphere'.¹⁰⁵ Beryl Randle, who competed in the walks from 1946, remembered that

there used to be great rivalry between the clubs, Birmingham Atlanta versus Birchfield at one stage. I mean there was other clubs but there was good wholesome competition, and ... yet when you got back in the dressing rooms you were all friends ...¹⁰⁶

Clubs would often travel by coach to inter-club or trophy meetings and team spirit was built up during journeys as much as it was during competition. Marea Hartman, who competed and officiated for Spartan LAC, fondly remembered how her club used to have singsongs on the bus and how on long journeys they would stop for fish and chips on the way home.¹⁰⁷ Open handicap meetings gave the opportunity for male and female athletes to mix and this was seen as 'part of the fun'.¹⁰⁸ Clubs used trains before they travelled by coaches, and again this created the chance for getting to know other local athletes and have a good time. In later years, area associations hired a coach, and this enabled athletes from one area to travel together to an event out of their locality. This not only helped to share costs but was also welcomed from a social perspective.

There were also opportunities to socialise after meetings. Athletes recalled how caterers provided teas after Birchfield Harriers' 'Waddilove Trophy' meetings, and they were usually available following inter-club matches as well. The MCWAAA frequently organised teas after races and on some occasions buffets were provided.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ *Athletics Weekly*, 14 Jul. 1956, Vol. 10, No. 28, p. 11.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Beryl Randle.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Marea Hartman.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Betty Smith (née Loakes), 17 Feb. 1995.

¹⁰⁹ MCWAAA committee minutes, Mar. 1940.

During the thirties, in addition to regular dances, Birchfield Harriers enjoyed a social atmosphere after training on a Sunday. Club members were responsible for looking after the track and grass areas, and former athletes recalled this time with pleasure:

Birchfield was rather nice because they always had these training mornings on Sunday mornings, a lot of people in those days lived in back to back houses and things like that where they had no fresh air facilities and that was what I always liked about Birchfield; that Sunday morning was always very much of a social time.

I don't know if all Birchfield Harriers would agree with me, but I always thought that was a side of it that they valued most, going down to the Alexander Ground, and they were fairly keen to win their events and trained much harder than I did, but there weren't the incentives that there are nowadays you see really. So on the whole you went for the social side of it as much as for anything else.¹¹⁰

Similar occasions were experienced after the war at some clubs. Training was a serious business for Betty and Dave Smith, but a relaxed atmosphere pervaded the track on

many Saturday afternoons at Whitstead Park when the sun was shining. We would start training at say two, and there would still be people doing something at five, and I don't mean by that we were running round the track all that time but we used to stop and have

¹¹⁰ Interview with Audrey Court.

sandwiches. You know make a day of actually training ... both men and women and children in the centre in prams.¹¹¹

As the number of clubs increased, it was not unusual for more than one to use the same training base. This also provided an opportunity to mix with other athletes and develop friendships. Birmingham Atlanta trained at the same venue as Birmingham Walking Club, and Lozell Harriers. This also enabled Beryl Randle to train with the male members of the walking club.¹¹²

Many track races were incorporated into village fetes, carnivals and festivals and these naturally had a more relaxed atmosphere. The very fact that there were fewer competitions meant that participants were less pressured. However, for those athletes wishing to participate in the throws there was a distinct lack of opportunities. In 1925, Sophie Elliott-Lynn appealed for field events to be included in more meetings:

If only sports promoting bodies would put on these field events a little oftener, though there might not be the immediate response there is to the "open Hundred," they would find that soon their entries would greatly enlarge and they would be doing a tremendous service both to the athletes of our country, and, what is more important, to those hundreds of strong, beautifully built girls who are not, and never can be, first-class runners of any distance.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Personal conversation with David Smith, husband of Betty Smith, during the interview with her, 17 Feb. 1995.

¹¹² Interview with Beryl Randle.

¹¹³ Athletics For Women and Girls. How To Be An Athlete and Why (1925), p. 17.

Some women, rather than complaining about the fewer competitions, saw this as a blessing, and felt that they would not have been able to cope with the expectations of modern athletes. The amount of training they did, which was usually limited to two or three times a week, also suited them. As more women began to work or went into higher education, they could successfully combine their sport, domestic lives and careers. Athletes who confined their racing to the track and field season rarely trained throughout the winter months, and often only returned to the club in March or April. Others did 'keep fit', and played netball, squash or hockey, thus having a complete break from athletics.

Training advice did begin to change in the fifties, however, reflecting the general attitude within the athletics world that women could cope with more training than had previously been expected. Moderation remained the key word, and women were certainly not advised to overstrain. Nevertheless, articles written throughout the fifties in the specialist athletics press, did encourage all levels of participants to stick to training schedules in both the winter and summer. Indeed attitudes had altered sufficiently by 1953 for middle distance runners to be told that 'there is no reason why a girl should not train every day of the week'¹¹⁴ and that they would 'often run in considerable discomfort.'¹¹⁵

Handicap events were by far the most popular method of competition at open meetings. A handicap is defined as 'a race or competition in which chances of competition are made more nearly equal by conceding start'.¹¹⁶ These races existed in British athletics up to the sixties, when scratch races had more or less replaced them. Many people involved in women's athletics felt that handicapping provided excellent competition, not only for the athletes, but also for spectators who saw exciting finishes to nearly all races. Each area association had official handicappers who

¹¹⁴ G. Pallett, 'Women and Cross Country', *Athletics Weekly*, 7 Feb. 1953, Vol. 7, No. 6, pp. 12-13.

¹¹⁵ G. Pallett, 'Another Letter to Eve', *Athletics Weekly*, 23 Jan. 1954, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ *The Concise Oxford Dictionary Seventh Edition* (Oxford 1987), p. 453.

covered all the meetings in their locality. Athletes had to fill in a handicapping form when they entered a race, in order to be allocated the correct start position.

The chief handicapper in each area kept a handicapping book in which every athlete's performance was recorded. The procedure was taken very seriously, and frequent complaints were recorded in the MCWAAA minutes that athletes were not filling in the forms correctly. If this did not improve, athletes risked not being accepted for races. Handicaps benefited all levels of competitors. The better runners, who started on scratch, had other athletes in front of them to aim for. In the half-mile run and the walks, where there was a vast difference between the performances of the best athletes and the rest, this was particularly helpful. For the slower participants, handicapping meant that everyone had a chance of winning a prize and it encouraged all levels to compete.¹¹⁷

The role of newspapers in promoting international sport was felt to be particularly significant, because 'by their sponsorship of meetings of international calibre (they) ... enabled athletes to obtain much-needed competition'.¹¹⁸ The same could be said for the grass roots. The News of the World had its own track and this was the training home of Mitcham Ladies Athletics Club. Their club members included the world long jump champion, Muriel Gunn, who competed under her married name of Cornell from 1929. The track was also the venue for several women's competitions, including the annual Middlesex Ladies' Championships.¹¹⁹

The amount of support provided by the national newspapers was crucial, not only to present a positive image but also for financial reasons. As well as providing patronage for international events, the Daily Mirror and News of the World, in particular, were generous sponsors of domestic women's athletics. The Daily Express

¹¹⁷ MCWAAA committee minutes, Jun. 1941 and interviews with Norma Blaine, Vera Searle and Audrey Court.

¹¹⁸ Athletics Weekly, 18 Sept. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 38.

¹¹⁹ The Times, 8 Aug. 1927.

was responsible for the development of the SAA, after discussions in the editorial office led to the idea of a 'central governing body for young people's athletics'. Their involvement continued until November 1928.¹²⁰ The News Chronicle supported the English Schools Championships from 1949, until it ceased publication in 1960. They also bought 'training films and organised training courses for young athletes of promise'.¹²¹

The personal interest shown by the owners of the Daily Mail and Daily Express, Northcliffe and Beaverbrook respectively, can partly explain the support of those papers. In contrast to the older, more traditional papers like Athletic News, they published positive reports of women's athletics as they tried to establish themselves in the twenties. During the inter-war years, the newspapers were fighting a circulation war, and both the Daily Mirror and News of the World used women's athletics to try to attract a bigger readership. Their policy was to portray themselves as modern, in order to attract younger readers. The Daily Express, Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, and News of the World all significantly expanded their circulation between the wars. While not wanting to suggest that this was solely because they all promoted women's athletics, the benefits gained by the sport were an unforeseen by-product of the circulation wars.¹²²

In 1925, the Daily Mirror Inter-Club match was introduced, in which clubs competed for the Atlanta Trophy. This was the first inter-club competition organised for women and was recognised as being one of the most important fixtures in the women's programme. The meeting was organised under the auspices of Middlesex

¹²⁰ Young, The History Of The English Schools, p. 16 and p. 52.

¹²¹ World Sports, Sept. 1953, Vol. 19, No. 9, p. 37.

¹²² Stevenson, British Society 1918-45, p. 398 and pp. 402-407. Daily Mail and Daily Mirror had a circulation of 1.5 million by the war. News of the World had a circulation of 2,535,000 in 1930 and 3,859,000 in 1937. In 1911 there were 54.3 million books issued compared to 85.7, 208 in 1935 and 247.3 in 1939.

Athletic Club and provided a full track and field programme, with the exception of a walk. The competition was open to all clubs affiliated to the WAAA, but as it was held in the South, most participants were based in that area. Nevertheless, bigger clubs outside the South were also attracted by the good quality of competition. In addition, the match provided the only opportunity, apart from the WAAA championships, for many of the best athletes to compete against each other.

The inaugural meeting attracted significant crowds, with 5,000 people estimated to be present at Stamford Bridge in 1925. The most prominent southern clubs contested it, with London Olympiades winning from Middlesex LAC, Manor Park LAC and the Polytechnic team. LOAC won six out of the ten events, reflecting just how superior they were within women's athletics in Britain. The premier midland club Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section was fifth, beating Goldsmith's Institute and North London Harriers. The remaining teams were Selfridges, which was the sole business house club represented and Banbury Harriers.¹²³ The women's inter-club competition was modelled on the men's equivalent 'Kinnaird Trophy' meeting. It provides another example of how, in the case of competition as well as organisation, the women's association followed the pattern already established in men's athletics. Open events were included in the match to provide competition for those athletes not selected to represent their club, or whose club had not entered.

The dominance of London Olympiades continued throughout the twenties. They won the first four Atlanta trophy meetings, losing for the first time in 1929 to Middlesex LAC. This should not be interpreted as meaning that the competition was weak. Newspaper coverage of inter-club matches reveal that a high standard of athletics was witnessed, and the meeting was viewed as a positive example of women's sport. The public was urged to watch in 1929, and was told that 'given fine weather they will have a delightful and exciting experience'.¹²⁴ The score in this year

¹²³ *Sporting Life*, 8 Jun. 1925, *Daily Sketch*, 8 Jun. 1925.

¹²⁴ *Daily Mirror*, 15 Jun. 1929.

provided another illustration of how good the competition was between the clubs. The trophy was not decided until the last event, of what was an all-southern affair.¹²⁵ Around one hundred and seventy competitors were involved in the championship events, with over three hundred in the open and handicap events. This 'was easily a record for the meeting' and suggests that women's athletics went from strength to strength during this period.

By the end of the twenties, there were several inter-club events, but with the exception of the Daily Mirror Trophy, they were usually between two or three local clubs. Some of the matches were mixed, with both men and women's events being offered. Mitcham held some of their club championship events alongside men's events in 1929, at a meeting that was organised to support hospital funds. Other examples were the established men's trophy meetings, in which teams were invited by the host club. Two clubs that regularly invited women's teams to compete in a separate competition alongside the men were Coventry Godiva Harriers and Birchfield. The female athletes would have welcomed this. Men's meetings received better sponsorship and more coverage by the media. Crowds were bigger at events where men competed. Women's clubs like London Olympiades, who put on open events alongside their club competitions, struggled to make a profit and indeed often made a loss. Host clubs had to hire the ground, buy prizes for the winners and provide teas after the meeting. The club minutes reveal just what a financial strain these events placed on the security of the club. When one considers that the LOAC was one of the most successful women's clubs, the cost of hosting matches must have prohibited smaller ones from following LOAC's lead.

The first women's league match provided some additional competition between local clubs. The inaugural league was organised by Surrey County WAAA, along the lines established by existing male competition of this kind. Two divisions

¹²⁵ The Daily Mirror, 17 Jun. 1929, says Middlesex won by one point, scoring 30 to LOAC's 29.

However, The Times, 17 Jun. 1929 says there was a 5 point difference.

were established and clubs competed against each other several times during the summer season. Both track and field events were included, although in 1936 which was the first year of the competition, throwing events were not included as scoring events.¹²⁶ Middlesex County also established a league in 1938, but an attempt to reintroduce it in 1949 failed, due to the lack of support of some clubs.¹²⁷ In 1947, Surrey re-organised their league, stressing the 'team spirit' of such competition. They introduced an additional five meetings, for athletes between fifteen and eighteen years of age. Anxiety about the lack of competition for younger athletes had often been expressed in the immediate post-war years. It was felt to be vital that the younger generation was encouraged to become involved in the sport.

London Olympiades was not the only women's club to operate on a limited budget, nor did the situation change after the war. All clubs existed on subscriptions and donations from patrons or members. Obviously, the smaller the number of members, the less money the club would have. The cost of travelling, as well as entering races, increased as the amount of competition expanded. When the national championships began to be held over two days in the fifties, athletes faced increased costs. In addition to paying for their travel and entry, if they lived outside London they had to secure Friday off work. Several clubs paid the entry fees of their members for championships, although this declined as costs increased. In 1952 the Birchfield LAC committee decided that 'every member must pay a quarter of their fare to any Championships or inter-club match outside the radius of thirty miles, and that under that distance no expense shall fall upon the Section.' The aim was that the club could then 'build up (their) finances to ensure representation at all important fixtures.' That season they had been forced to decline invitations to several inter-club meetings, in order to keep the club financially sound. Had they accepted every invitation the

¹²⁶ *World Sports*, Jun. 1936, Vol. 1, No. 2. pp. 75-77.

¹²⁷ LOAC committee minutes, 19 Feb. 1938, 6 Dec. 1949 and 31 Mar. 1950.

balance would have been halved. In another effort to raise money, subscriptions were increased to five shillings (25p) for seniors, and two and six (12½p) for juniors.¹²⁸

Social occasions were often organised by a club in order to raise much-needed funds. Dances remained a chief source of income, along with sweepstakes after the war.¹²⁹ LOAC dances were organised by the Misses Parsons, two sisters who not only took responsibility for this aspect of club life, but also sat on the committee and were particularly involved in cross country and walking. On occasion, clubs were helped by members offering to host social evenings in their homes at their own expense. Other fund raising exercises included the usual raffles, jumble sales and at Christmas, carol singing. LOAC were helped in the forties by the mother of one of their members, Doris Batter. She made vests and shorts which members could purchase, the profits going to the club. Not only did this help funds, but it also resulted in all team members wearing the same style of racing kit. In the years after the Second World War, funds could be supplemented by broadcasting fees when members were featured in commentaries. Though the athletes did not receive any financial fee for appearing, their club could.¹³⁰

The major event of the year was the WAAA English Championships. The inaugural competition was held at the Oxo Grounds at Bromley, on 18 August 1923. It was not scheduled to start until three in the afternoon, reflecting the fact that the number of entries was much smaller than in later years, when it was held first over two days, and then three. Nevertheless, in 1923 there were over eighty individual entries, with five teams in the medley relay race.¹³¹ A full track and field programme was offered, including the 440 yards and 880 yards, both of which were frowned

¹²⁸ BHLS AGM minutes, 1952.

¹²⁹ Modern Athletics, Nov. 1957, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 3.

¹³⁰ BHLS AGM minutes, 25 Feb. 1956, the London Club's Association sent £13.5s as a token for Diane Leather's appearance at their London versus Moscow match in 1954.

¹³¹ This consisted of 220 yards, 110, 220 and 110 yards.

upon by the international governing bodies until long after the Second World War. To encourage athletes to attend from outside the local area, the WAAA arranged for competitors to be able to purchase cheap rail tickets.

By 1928, the WAAA Championships had moved to Stamford Bridge, home of most of the women's major events. Whereas the News of The World gave minimal coverage to the championships in 1924, and no reports were found in subsequent years, by 1928 the meeting was attracting significant newspaper publicity. A detailed report, together with listed results of the first three in all events, was published in the News of the World,¹³² under the sub-title 'Amazing Feats In Women's Championships'. A high standard of performances were regularly recorded. For example, at the inaugural championship, a world record was set in the 220 yards and a British record in the weight.¹³³ Several world records were broken in 1928 and again the following year. Miss King, running for Kent Ladies Athletic Club, set new figures for the 440 yards and was the first female athlete to go under sixty seconds. Hilda Hatt of London Olympiades set a new 80 metre hurdles world record, while Mary Weston, Muriel Cornell and Miss L. Howes, all improved their own British records in the shot putt, long jump and one mile walk respectively.¹³⁴

The WAAA's policy of trying to encourage all levels of ability was evident at their championships. In addition to the scratch races, they included several handicap events. The programme altered as women's athletics developed. The 1923 championships included both javelin and shot putt competitions. However, in contrast

¹³² News of the World, 15 Jul. 1928. For the 1924 championships, see 29 Jun. 1924.

¹³³ The Times, 20 Aug. 1923. The 'weight' is now known as the shot putt and is referred to as this during this thesis. The distance was a combination of left and right throws and was won by Florence Birchenough from LOAC with 53 feet 0.5 inches. The 220 yards was won by E. Edwards also LOAC in 27 seconds.

¹³⁴ Mary Weston was later reported to have changed her sex and lived as a man. See chapter five for more on this.

to later years, the winning distance was a combination of the athlete's best left and right handed throws. While all the other races continued to be over yards, the hurdles were changed from 100 yards in 1928, to 80 metres in 1929, to fall in line with international competition.¹³⁵ The walkers competed over 880 yards in 1927, but in the mile the following year. Event changes reflected altering opinions about what female athletes could cope with either physically or mentally. It was not until 1936 that the mile was included in the WAAA Championships, despite the fact that women had been running two and a half-miles over cross country.

As we have seen, there was far more demand for the sprinting events than any other distance. Several clubs such as Leicester and Nottingham were solely 'summer clubs' and had no cross country or walking section.¹³⁶ Initially, walking and cross country seasons overlapped and many athletes combined the two. By the fifties, however, the seasons were clearly defined, with cross country from December until March, road walking and road relays in April during the 'short season' and then track from April to September. Athletes continued to do both cross country and walking during the winter, because there was so few cross country competitions. The training complimented each other and allowed athletes to remain involved in the club during the winter. However, it was harder to encourage athletes to train for the mile, half-mile, and the throws, if there were few opportunities for them to compete. Roma Ashby's best distances were the mile and 1500 metres, but she was forced to compete in the 800 metres at both the International Student Games and most domestic meetings. Few matches included the longer distance and apart from the national and area championships, she had little competition. Surely many women would have agreed with her view that, 'there was little point in running 1500 metres' during the fifties and sixties.

¹³⁵ News of the World, 15 Jul. 1928 and 7 Jul. 1929.

¹³⁶ Midland Counties WAAA committee minutes, 7 Apr. 1938.

The lack of athletes interested in these events was illustrated by her experiences at the clubs where she trained. At Coventry Godiva she was usually on her own and when she moved to London, and trained with the much bigger London Olympiades, there was still only a 'very small group of girls' who participated in the middle distances. However, there was surprisingly little concern expressed by the athletes about the lack of opportunities. The absence of any action by female international athletes to change the situation was mirrored at the grass roots. Ashby, who would have arguably gained selection over the mile or 1500 metres had it been an international event, simply accepted the situation, just as she did the greater coverage and sponsorship accorded to men's athletics. She did not see the need to agitate for change, because it

applied to many things for women in those days. The men were seen as superior in tennis and lots of other sports, so again it didn't worry me, I didn't feel angry about it ... it was just the situation. No, I never believed that the men were better, it was just the situation at the time and you accepted it.¹³⁷

This attitude can be partly explained by the fact that for women like Ashby, athletics was a very small part of their life. They were involved for their own personal enjoyment, and it was never intended to be more important than their family, and in the case of those who worked, than their job. Women, who participated at the grass roots level, were grateful that club athletics allowed them to relax after a day at work. Marea Hartman said that for her, club life was 'wonderful', and after training with Spartan LAC at Old Deer Park Richmond, she would 'feel a totally different person.'¹³⁸ This is not to say that they were not competitive or serious about their

¹³⁷ Interview with Roma White (née Ashby), 28 Dec. 1994.

¹³⁸ Interview with Marea Hartman.

sport, but like many of the men who were involved, athletics was 'just a sport'. The women argue that they wanted to get the best out of themselves, but did not consider it a possibility to challenge the rules. That role was left to the governing bodies.

This chapter has concentrated on activity in the South and Midlands. This is largely due to the difficulty in finding detailed information about women's athletics in the North. Nevertheless, athletics was of course, also popular there. Morecambe Council was an exceptional supporter of women's athletics. The 1935 NCWAAA Cross Country Championships was contested after the England versus Scotland Cross Country International, which Morecambe hosted.¹³⁹ Later in the same year, the council and NCWAAA hosted the first triangular contest held in the North of England. This was a track and field meeting, and was sponsored by the Daily Sketch. Local people were urged to make the most of 'this splendid opportunity', which was 'the only all women's meeting to be held in the North' at this time.¹⁴⁰

A ladies 100 yards handicap was reported at Eccles United Athletic and Football Club as early as 1921, illustrating that such races were just as available to women in this area as elsewhere in England.¹⁴¹ The inaugural Northern Cross Country Championships, won by Miss K. Cowgill from Airedale Harriers, was organised during the 1931-32 winter season. Two other successful clubs in the thirties were Hallamshire and Bradford Athletic Club.¹⁴² Sheffield Harriers seems to have been at the forefront of women's cross country in this area. One of their members criticised the local press in November 1927, for not 'encouraging the weaker sex to

¹³⁹ Held Easter Sunday, 20 Apr. 1935.

¹⁴⁰ Programme of NCWAAA Cross Country Championships, and Invitational Cross Country Race - England versus Scotland, 20 Apr. 1935.

¹⁴¹ Rotherham Advertiser, 20 Aug. 1921 cited in de Roeck, A History of Rotherham Harriers, p. 12. Miss L. Hill of Rotherham won.

¹⁴² Information about northern races and clubs was drawn from race programmes, kept in a file on northern women's athletics at the NCAL, Birmingham University.

take up the healthy exercise of cross country running'. One club that established a women's section in the inter-war years was Rotherham Harriers. This had been a men's club since 1887, and Mr E. F. de Roeck founded the women's section in April 1932. The section had twelve founder members, including four younger girls. Roeck's wife, who was an active athlete like her husband, took the position of first secretary, and his sister, Victoria de Roeck, captain.¹⁴³

While one cannot say for certain how many clubs there were operating in the North of England before the war, there does not appear to have been so much activity as further south. Yorkshire County WAAA seems to have been one of the most active areas, and had championships for women during the thirties. One local source claims that a sealed-handicap cross country was held for South Yorkshire women, in January 1927.¹⁴⁴ This race, which is thought to be the first of its kind, was organised by Sheffield Harriers. Six women, who it was reported had been training for several weeks, lined up. The competitors raced over a variety of roads, fields and woods, while

a great crowd cheered them on to the finishing point at the Millhouses Hotel. During the race, the girls had to cross walls, and gates and several of them vaulted in the approved style.¹⁴⁵

Rather than the number of active clubs increasing, new clubs often replaced those that could no longer survive. Available meeting programmes, dating from the early and mid-1930s, show that usually only five clubs entered a complete team in NCWAAA Championships, with an additional two or three clubs having individual representatives. The number of athletes involved can be gauged from the team entries.

¹⁴³ de Roeck, *A History of Rotherham Harriers*, pp. 29-33 and p. 69.

¹⁴⁴ This means they could all start together and their handicap was added on to their finish time.

¹⁴⁵ de Roeck, *A History of Rotherham Harriers*, p. 30.

In 1933, five teams were represented, while an additional two had one individual athlete running. Sheffield United Harriers and AC, Airedale Harriers, and Slaithwaite United Harriers all had twelve athletes entered, while Bolton United Harriers and AC had eight. Three years later, Winton Harriers, who had one athlete in the 1933 race, entered a team of ten, but Sheffield was no longer represented. The inaugural NCWAAA Track and Field Championship Day was not held until 1952, when for the first time all events were held on the same day. The sponsorship of *Port Sunlight* facilitated this, and meant that the area association did not have to farm out events to a variety of meetings during the season. This practice had been a common one for all associations in the early years.

Contemporary comments reveal that some people felt the London athletes received more attention. As we have seen, the Home Counties dominated the national WAAA, a fact that was felt to explain the choice of athletes for representative matches. Referring to one successful local athlete, the athletics correspondent asserted that 'had she been a London athlete she'd be much better known than she is, but down Pompey way everyone knows and admires Lily Chalmers.'¹⁴⁶ The international runner Diane Leather, moved to London from her Midlands home in 1957, in order to get better competition and more matches. The fact that the WAAA Championships was always held in London caused some athletes problems, and was the cause of much discontent. While the top ranked members would usually travel every year to compete, especially when international selection was at stake, other club athletes stayed away. Northern athletes felt they received less recognition from the WAAA, and that their club secretaries were not always informed about competitions or changes to event timetables. One of the best northern athletes of the fifties, middle distance runner Anne Oliver, complained that her local press failed to provide adequate coverage. She reported that Athletics Weekly filled this gap, and allowed

¹⁴⁶ Athletics Weekly, 31 May 1952, p. 3.

northern athletes to compare their own performances with other athletes, as well as finding out where and when races were to be held.¹⁴⁷

Cross Country and Race Walking for Women Athletes

Clubs like Birchfield Harriers, which had a strong history of middle distance running, had always been involved in the winter activities. In contrast, clubs that concentrated on sprinting attracted fewer athletes interested in distance training. Consequently they failed to establish a tradition of cross country and walking. Former athletes who acted as role models must have played an important part in a club's subsequent development. Despite this, some clubs did branch out as the number of women joining local athletic clubs increased, particularly after the Second World War. Some areas of the country reported a growth of interest where previously there had been none. The first cross country for female athletes in Hampshire was held in 1950, after which the county association announced it would be organised regularly in future. In 1957, the Midland Senior Cross County Championships was reported to have attracted 'all of Malvern ... to watch the first women's event ever staged in that vicinity.'¹⁴⁸

Cross country had been particularly popular in the inter-war years and, unlike the immediate post-war period, the southern clubs more than held their own against the Midlands. Pallett maintained that opposition was voiced against women competing over the country in the 1920s,¹⁴⁹ but little evidence of this can be found in contemporary newspapers or committee minutes. Instead, the strange situation existed that women could run two and a half-miles in cross country but no more than half a mile on the track. The explanation for this anomaly appears to be that track races

¹⁴⁷ Letter from Anne Oliver in Athletics Weekly, 12 Feb. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 7, p. 18.

¹⁴⁸ Athletics Weekly, 23 Feb. 1957, Vol. 11, No. 8 p. 6.

¹⁴⁹ Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 172.

were considered more stressful, as athletes would put in far more effort than they would in cross country. Cross country was considered to suit slower female athletes, who had 'little hope of individual honours'. Like relays and inter-club track matches, cross country was seen 'to build team spirit and result in a really happy spirit (at) clubs.'¹⁵⁰

There was plenty of evidence that it was 'character building' as well. Women athletes were not spared 'real' courses, but ran in all weathers, negotiating muddy fields, stiles and fences. In an apparent effort to prove this point, Athletics Weekly published a photograph of a southern inter-county race, under the caption 'Who said our girls' aren't tough enough?' The women are shown climbing a long hill in the snow.¹⁵¹ Facilities were even more primitive than at track meetings, and competitors often had to change in fields and travel home still covered in mud. Mary Markey had fond memories of training over the country in her home town of Coventry. She remarked that

I don't call this cross country now; it's not the same. (We) had to go up and down dale ... The Allesley hotel used to be the end of the city, there wasn't a house after that and we ran straight out into the country. Yes it was lovely, but then we'd just have to stand in the tub and wash our legs you know.¹⁵²

Although the discipline attracted increasingly large fields during the fifties, it would appear that the WAAA did not consider it to be of the same importance as

¹⁵⁰ C. Mary Bickley, 'There Are Definite Benefits in Cross Country Running', Modern Athletics, Jan. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 20-21. Bickley was the honorary secretary of the Women's Cross Country and Road Walking Association.

¹⁵¹ 9 Feb. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 6.

¹⁵² Interview with Mary Markey.

track racing. There had been a cross country international in 1938 against France, but this was not resumed after the war. Instead, in 1954, the first international was held between women representing England and Scotland. However, this was stopped again in 1958, due to insufficient funds. The lack of a representative match would have undoubtedly reduced interest in training for the national championships, and came as a grave disappointment to distance athletes.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, the middle distance track runners supported domestic cross country and by 1958, it was recognised as beneficial for the faster athletes who used it as training during the winter. Top British half-mile and mile runner, Diane Leather, not only enjoyed cross country, but also 'used it as a means of building up strength for the track season'.¹⁵⁴

The discipline that was arguably the cheapest option was walking. This was suggested as a reason why some women tried the event:

Costs could effect various people yes, and I think that is why with some people, walking was, now I'm putting it one way and I don't want it to be taken the wrong way, a poorer man's sport, because with track events you had to buy a pair of spikes. Now with a road walk you could, generally speaking, get away with a pair of (ordinary) walking shoes. I didn't, I bought some hand-made shoes, but originally a lot of people could walk on the road, and didn't have to go in for any specialist gear like a pair of spikes.¹⁵⁵

For those women interested in road walking, national, regional and inter-area events were organised, including a national junior championship. The major honours went to members of Middlesex Ladies for the first seven years. This club was ably

¹⁵³ Letter in *Athletics Weekly*, 25 Jan. 1958, Vol. 12, No. 4, p. 5.

¹⁵⁴ Personal correspondence with Diane Charles (née Leather), Jul. 1996.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with Beryl Randle.

supported by London Olympiades, who are recognised as being responsible for pioneering race walking during the 1920s, in addition to cross country. Mirroring the subsequent developments in cross country, the midland clubs proved to be the stronger in the years immediately after the war. This was due, in large part, to the fact that some of the biggest clubs had continued to compete and train throughout the war. They built up a tradition of walkers, and individual and team successes no doubt encouraged other athletes to become involved. A small number of clubs, in particular, Birchfield Harriers Ladies' Section, Harbourne, Small Heath, and Birmingham Atlanta provided many individual and team winners.

Care should be taken, however, not to exaggerate the amount of race walking activity. At the 1955 MCWAAA Road Walk Championships, eight clubs entered compared to fifteen in the cross country championships of the same area. Four years later, thirty-seven athletes, drawn from only five clubs entered the MCWAAA walking championships. Clubs that had a very proud history in this sphere of athletics struggled to survive, as membership fell. Birmingham Atlanta, one of the strongest clubs just after the war, was only able to enter one individual in the 1959 Senior MCWAAA Championships. This was despite the midland secretary, Mrs Nelson-Neal, appealing in a letter to all club secretaries for greater support of the championships. She argued it would be beneficial for the sport, as well as individual athletes, if clubs 'do not let them lose their interest in athletics (and) ask them to try their ability for walking.' The number of clubs involved at national level was very small, with five or six regularly competing in the national road walking championships.¹⁵⁶

Undoubtedly the most successful club in this period was BHLS, who won the National Road Walk Championships from 1949-1953. London Olympiades signified a return to form in 1951, however, when they won the first two individual places. Birchfield had far greater strength in depth though and won the team competition by

¹⁵⁶ Pallett, *Women's Athletics*, pp. 176-177.

ten points from the London club. The lack of depth in walking was obvious at the 'Midlands versus South' meeting, promoted by LOAC in 1955. Each area team consisted of ten athletes, but it was clear that one or two clubs were dominating walking. For the Midlands, seven athletes were members of BHLS, and two of Small Heath. The southern team consisted of six LOAC athletes, and three from Ilford LAC.¹⁵⁷

Some of the first women walkers had male relatives already involved in the sport, and it cannot be a coincidence that these women chose to participate in what has always been a less glamorous branch of the sport. One of the best athletes before the war was Winnie Horton, whose father and brothers met with considerable success in the same discipline. By the 1950s, Miss Horton was married to a fellow walker. Family networks were obviously as important in walking as in the other spheres of athletics.¹⁵⁸ Walking, both on the track and on the roads, has never been accorded the same media coverage as track and field events. Consequently, the public have remained largely ignorant of athletes' achievements. Even the specialist magazine, Athletics Weekly, neglected women's road and track walking.¹⁵⁹ This situation can be partly explained by the fact that women's walking was not included in the international programme, and outside Britain very few countries supported it. Within this country, however, it was a very popular event, especially in the early years of women's athletics. It was included in most open meetings as soon as women's events were accepted, and fewer opposing comments were expressed against women walking a mile or half-mile than running it.

¹⁵⁷ Programme from the event.

¹⁵⁸ F. W. Blackmore, 'Race Walking. Greeting the Ladies', Athletics Weekly, Dec. 16. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 50 p. 11.

¹⁵⁹ F. W. Blackmore, 'Race Walking', Athletics Weekly, Dec 16. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 50 p. 11. A notable exception to this was in Athletic Review, Sept. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 5, when Beryl Randle was on the front cover as WAAA Mile Track Champion.

The mistake should not be made that walking was an easier option. These athletes trained as hard as any others, and often incorporated running into their training schedules. As has already been indicated, it was common for all distance athletes to compete in both walking and running, particularly in the first few years of participation. This was due, in part, to the fact that clubs encouraged a general emphasis away from specialisation. Some clubs had their own championships and this was viewed as a way to get members to try a range of events. The competitions often revealed hidden talent and had the potential for encouraging women to do the less popular events. Beryl Randle, despite being the leading British walker, also competed in the discus, placing second in the MCWAAA Championship on one occasion.¹⁶⁰

Several athletes would 'double-up' and compete in both the running and walking mile in the WAAA Championships. Two very successful athletes to do this were Joyce Heath who competed for Small Heath Harriers and Beryl Randle, who represented Birmingham Atlanta and later Birchfield. In a period when many people were still expressing caution about the capacity of women to cope with the longer distances, their achievements were an outstanding advertisement for female athletic ability. The following year, when the WAAA reverted to the linear distances, she was third in the track walk.¹⁶¹ In a further departure from the usual limitations regulating women's performances, road walks were held over four and a half-miles by 1959. This was a significant increase from 1953, when women competed over two and a half-miles.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Beryl Randle.

¹⁶¹ Pallett, *Women's Athletics*, p. 176 and interview with Beryl Randle.

¹⁶² Programmes of MCWAAA Senior Road Walks, 1953 and 1959.

The Effect of the Second World War on Women's Domestic Athletics

Any discussion of the twentieth century obviously has to include the effects of the two world wars. The 1914-18 conflict has already been referred to. While one should not see the Second World War as a catalyst for all the subsequent developments that followed, it clearly had a huge effect on women in Britain. All international competition immediately ended when war broke out, but some domestic meetings continued to be held throughout the hostilities. As we have seen, the MCWAAA was the only women's organisation that remained active during all six years. Consequently, there was more competition in this area than in either the South or North. Several measures were put into action by the MCWAAA in order to try to maintain the interest of clubs. As already explained, many business house athletic sections were not active in wartime, and other clubs folded as officials found they were unable to continue. Some of the larger grounds were closed by the Government, resulting in clubs losing their headquarters. In order to 'ensure that interest would not be completely lost, and so pave the way for their re-opening immediately we return to more peaceful times', clubs who had closed were kept informed of MCWAAA activities. A summer league was introduced for the first time in 1942, providing several inter-club meetings and covering the full range of events.¹⁶³

A few clubs did affiliate to the MCWAAA during the war, showing that athletics was still able to capture some interest. In 1939, Broadway Athletic Club and Leicester College of Art and Technology were accepted by the MCWAAA. Although there was subsequently, little mention of the former, Leicester College continued to be involved after the war. Several of the bigger clubs remained active, including BHLS, Dudley, Small Heath, Birmingham Atlanta, the General Electrical Company, and West Bromwich. All these were regularly represented by athletes at local races, while other clubs, such as Dunlop, continued to pay their affiliation fees in order to

¹⁶³ MCWAAA committee minutes, Mar. 1940, May 1942, Sept. 1942.

remain officially in existence. Championship events continued to be organised to fuel the interest of athletes.

The 1940 MCWAAA Road Walk Championships, although making an eight-shilling loss (40p) for the association, was voted 'an outstanding success, both for the organisation and the competition.'¹⁶⁴ Later in the same year, a Junior Track Championship Day was held at Chasetown in Staffordshire. This was organised as a joint meeting with the men. In 1941, BHLS promoted a two mile run during the winter season, Birmingham Atlanta organised a road relay, and a Novice Cross Country Championships was held by the MCWAAA.¹⁶⁵ The amount of competition increased in 1942. A novice, junior and senior cross country was staged, and there was also a novice and senior road walk. In addition, the MCWAAA organised an open competition at the end of the track season.

In 1943, the MCWAAA was able to host a full quota of championships, over all surfaces, for the first time since the outbreak of war. The association reported an 'excellent spirit among the clubs' and was clearly optimistic about the future. They had been successful in retaining a good level of activity, and continued to encourage athletes to take up a variety of disciplines. The support of the big clubs, in particular BHLS and Birmingham Atlanta, had been crucial. They were keen to promote competition, as this would stimulate their own members. Individuals like Mrs Nelson-Neal were determined to keep women's athletics alive, not only at her own club but also throughout the area. Due to the amount of work she did as secretary, many clubs remained in touch with the MCWAAA, even if they had few or no active members. The minutes pay tribute to the actions of a small group of dedicated men and women, who provided the opportunity for women to have both competition and training during such an unstable period.

¹⁶⁴ MCWAAA committee minutes, 28 May 1940.

¹⁶⁵ MCWAAA committee minutes, Mar. 1941.

The national WAAA began to discuss the possibility of a return to competition in 1943. However, a national programme was not a possibility until peace was achieved. Obviously, before this time few people would have been happy to travel to London, or any of the main cities, even if transport had been easy. In 1945, the MCWAAA suggested a match between themselves and the South, preferably to include a team from the North as well. The aim of the association was 'to help the standard of competition at the British Championships and (in order to do this) the Midlands were keen to travel.'¹⁶⁶ The match was accepted by the SCWAAA, and together with the revival of interest from clubs in that area, was seen to prove that 'the ladies may be beating the men in getting back to normal once more.' The SCWAAA held an AGM in October 1945, and reported high hopes that they would soon have over ninety affiliated clubs, as they had had before the war. Matters improved further when athletes, male officials, and coaches were demobbed.

By January 1946, the WAAA was able to report a significant amount of activity in both the Midland and southern regions. The North, 'despite a very bad time during the last six years' (was) 'endeavouring to get its clubs "going" again.'¹⁶⁷ By the end of the year, fifty clubs were affiliated to the SCWAAA, and this increased to over seventy by the end of 1947.¹⁶⁸

It is important to reiterate that, as we have seen, several northern university teams were active in the forties, just as they had been in the inter-war years. Even if the NCWAAA was slow to re-establish itself, the University Athletic Union (UAU) was not. Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester all entered teams alongside Birmingham, London and Southampton for the 1946 Universities Athletic Championships. In 1947, the UAU helped to arrange a meeting to celebrate the WAAA's twenty-fifth anniversary. A track and field event was held at Motspur Park on 13 September, and

¹⁶⁶ Committee minutes, Mar. 1945.

¹⁶⁷ *Athletics*, Jan. 1946, Vol. 2 No. 2, p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ *Athletics*, Dec. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 13 p. 15, and Jun. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 19, p. 22.

was supported by athletes from the armed services in addition to those from the universities and affiliated clubs. Whether athletic activity in the universities stimulated local clubs is unclear, but there was sufficient interest to justify a NCWAAA Track and Field Championships in 1948.¹⁶⁹

Kent LAC was one of the first southern clubs to stage a women's track and field meeting after the war. It hosted a match on Whit-Monday in 1946 and this was followed by the Kent County Track and Field Championships. The 1946 summer season ended with a triangular match between Kent, Surrey and Middlesex, at the News of the World ground at Mitcham.¹⁷⁰ Part of the reason for the level of athletic activity in the Kent area was the enthusiasm of Mr W. Hitchin. He was Honorary Secretary of the Kent WAAA as well as vice-president of the SCWAAA. When he died at the age of fifty, in 1952, the full extent of his support was made clear in Athletics Weekly.¹⁷¹

Surrey and Essex held their first county championships after the war in 1946, when Surrey was reported to be 'doing all they can to encourage athletics for women and girls in their County.'¹⁷² Several clubs specifically mentioned in Athletics Weekly that they catered for both men and women, including the newly affiliated Oxford City. Liverpool Pembroke AC stated that their ladies' section trained on the same night as the male members, and that a coach was available. Other established men's clubs, like the City of Rochester, founded a women's section in 1946. They reported they had received 'encouraging support ... and amongst the seventeen members who have already joined are some promising athletes.'¹⁷³ Three of the strongest clubs before the war, Spartan LAC, London Olympiades, and Middlesex

¹⁶⁹ Athletics, Sept. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 22 p. 3 and p. 13.

¹⁷⁰ Athletics, Nov. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 12, p. 16.

¹⁷¹ 2 Feb. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 5, p. 3.

¹⁷² Athletics, Jun. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 19, pp. 22-23.

¹⁷³ Athletics, Jun 1946, Vol. 2, No. 7, p. 9 and p. 11, and Jul. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 8, p. 11.

LAC, advertised a return to training during the same year. In addition to a club championships in June, Spartan had already arranged inter-club competitions with Epsom and Ewell Harriers, Hercules AC, and Tooting Bec. This illustrates how quickly some clubs returned to pre-war levels of activity.¹⁷⁴ The following year, Spartan travelled to Birmingham to compete against Birchfield LAC and Leicester College of Art and Technology, in the 'Waddilove Trophy' Meeting. Hosted by Birchfield Harriers, this competition was to become increasingly popular for the big women's clubs, as it offered top class athletics.

In an attempt to revive interest in cross country, the MCWAAA challenged Yorkshire to a cross country match in December 1945. To encourage them to accept, the MCWAAA offered to travel and to allow three of their athletes, who were living in the North, to represent the northern team. In preparation for the resumption of the National Cross Country Championships in 1946, the MCWAAA organised a cross country league of five races in 1945. Unfortunately, the popularity of cross country in both the South and North was far less than in the Midlands. Neither Yorkshire, nor the southern counties could accept the proposed competitions. Furthermore, when the National Cross Country Championships was advertised in 1946, only five teams entered, and the race was in danger of being cancelled. The following year only eight teams competed in the National Junior Cross Country Championships, with Spartan LAC the sole southern club.¹⁷⁵ Attempts were made to encourage more athletes to try both cross country and race walking. In 1947, a committee member of the MCWAAA, Mr Lewis, donated two sets of novice championship medals to the South and North. In a similar attempt to help track racing prosper, Lewis sent a team from his club, Birmingham Atlanta, to compete in the WAAA silver jubilee meeting in 1947, held in London. They paid their own fees instead of the meeting host, as was

¹⁷⁴ Athletics, Jun. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 7, p. 14.

¹⁷⁵ Athletics, Feb. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 15, p. 12.

the usual practice. The club's 'sportsmanship' was subsequently praised by the WAAA.¹⁷⁶

Facilities at the Women's Clubs

Although the number of women's clubs after the war was far greater than in the early years, many female athletes were still without a local athletics club, and others were faced with poor facilities. In the late 1950s, there were still areas of Britain that did not have any WAAA-qualified coaches.¹⁷⁷ If there was no other choice, WAAA honorary coaches sent schedules by post.¹⁷⁸ Even established women's sections were not always able to offer a coach to all their athletes. At Coventry Godiva, Roma Ashby was left largely to her own devices. The situation did not unduly worry her as she relished the fact that she was her own boss. Other athletes, however, may not have been so confident. They would have been drawn to clubs that could provide structured training, under the direction of a qualified coach.

As the first generation of female athletes ended their competitive careers, the potential to expand the number of female coaches and officials increased. However, the majority of female athletes left the sport once they stopped competing, to concentrate on the other parts of their lives. Dorothy Tyler was the only woman in the sixties to be a qualified AAA honorary senior coach. Long after she stopped competing herself, Tyler coached at Mitcham. London Olympiades, which had

¹⁷⁶ Athletics, Oct. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 23, p. 18. See also MCWAAA committee minutes, 1946.

¹⁷⁷ E. Baker, 'Wanted – Many More Honorary Senior Coaches!', Modern Athletics, Jul. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 7, p. 33. The South had the greatest number with thirteen Senior coaches, three living in Surrey, three in Essex, two in Sussex and one each in Hertfordshire, Dorset, Hampshire, Norfolk and Middlesex. The Midlands had six from Staffordshire and 'two or three' from Warwickshire while the north only two in Durham and one in Lancashire.

¹⁷⁸ Modern Athletics, Nov. 1957, Vol. 1, No. 3, p.12, Jul. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 7, p. 33.

several training bases around London, tried to have one coach per venue. However, there was rarely anyone specialising in a particular event.¹⁷⁹ The situation was the same at both BHLS and Birmingham Atlanta. As we have seen, Mrs Nelson-Neal was the most influential person in midland women's athletics, but her role at her own club should not be neglected. Athletes remember her ability as a coach and motivator with the greatest respect. She coached a whole range of events and helped to produce numerous top quality athletes, including the British record holder in the mile walk, Beryl Randle and the first woman to go under five minutes for the mile run, Diane Leather. Leather recalled that it was Nelson-Neal who had 'brought me from being a total novice to international standard, for which I shall always be grateful'.¹⁸⁰

Different areas and the clubs within them had varying standards of facilities. The local council, which owned many of the grounds clubs used, were responsible for whether or not they were of a high standard. In addition, local education authorities played an increasing part in providing equipment and marking out tracks in school grounds. They also gave a lot of support to the English School Championships. Durham county education committee laid a new cinder track for the 1958 championships, held on the site of Houghton-le-Spring Modern School. Shrewsbury Technical College was the venue for the 1960 championships and this too had a new track, as did Chesterfield School in Derbyshire, which was used for the 1961 meeting.¹⁸¹

The lack of running tracks had been noted in the 1930s, as had the lack of facilities for field athletes.¹⁸² After the war, the problem was exacerbated by the lack of funds available for sports stadia, until the late fifties. In 1947, the WAAA planned to hold the senior track and field championships outside London, for the first and only

¹⁷⁹ In 1950, they trained at Alperton, Edmonton, Southall and Tooting tracks.

¹⁸⁰ Personal correspondence with Diane Charles.

¹⁸¹ Modern Athletics, Jan. 1960, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 20.

¹⁸² National Fitness The First Steps (1937), p. 7

time. However, the MCWAAA was unable to find a 'suitable ground'. Consequently, the championships reverted to the South of England. Three years later, the Midland Counties WAAA was forced to cancel its area championships, again because no suitable ground could be hired. Clearly, there was a lack of quality arenas in the area.¹⁸³ The disciplines worst affected were the field events. Athletes at LOAC in the 1930s, had to contend with javelins that were not the correct weight, and this continued to be a problem in all the throwing events at many clubs after the war.¹⁸⁴ In 1955, Coventry Godiva ladies' section reported to their General Committee that they urgently required field event equipment, and asked permission to buy both a shot and javelin. Further complaints were made in 1958, that the jumping facilities were of a very poor standard, and needed attention'.¹⁸⁵

Although athletics was offered in schools, it was still allocated far less time than the traditional team sports. Even when it was taught, facilities were often poor. As in club athletics, it was the throwing and jumping events that were affected the worst. Throwing was often not included in physical education, a situation that was felt to be a contributory factor to Britain's poor record in these events at international level.¹⁸⁶ In an attempt to raise field standards in the Midlands, the area association implemented a field games league. Concern was also expressed by the WAAA, which in 1947 decided to form a committee responsible for field events. Training for club coaches was arranged, and race organisers were encouraged to 'note that ladies are interested in events other than sprints and relays'.¹⁸⁷ While athletics for women continued to grow in popularity, it was still possible to say in the early fifties that 'in

¹⁸³ *Athletics*, Mar. 1947, Vol. 3, No. 16, p. 17. See also MCWAAA AGM minutes, Nov. 1950.

¹⁸⁴ LOAC committee minutes, 18 May 1934.

¹⁸⁵ Coventry Godiva Harriers, General Committee, 15 Jun. 1955, and 9 Jul. 1958.

¹⁸⁶ H. Abrahams, and J. Crump, *Athletics* (1951), p. 8.

¹⁸⁷ *Athletics* Jan. Vol. 3, No. 14, p. 6.

the main there is an appalling lack of facilities for women, and in many cases sheer ignorance of what the sport has to offer them.'¹⁸⁸

The experiences of several international athletes illustrated the problems faced by individuals in the fifties. When she was introduced to hurdling at school, Jean Desforges-Pickering used 'the school corridor for training.' She recalled that 'there wasn't a blade of grass anywhere.'¹⁸⁹ Betty Loakes often trained on the grass centre of a cycling track in Ketteringham. To create a track, the athletes 'flagged (it) for training sessions.' She did, however, have the use of a track at Wellingborough Boys Grammar School during the summer. Time restrictions often dictated the type of sessions athletes did. In the winter, there was the problem of training where it was light, and Betty Loakes would run on the roads with streetlights, as sports grounds were rarely floodlit. For women at Ketteringham who wanted to do field events, the situation was even worse, and therefore they had few if any such athletes. When some girls expressed an interest in the long jump, for instance, they were prevented from digging a sandpit at the sports ground, and the enthusiasm died. Changing facilities for the club were also crude, with both the men and women using a boat house at one ground, and a 'sort of loft accommodation which was unsuitable for men let alone women', at the other site.¹⁹⁰

Birmingham Atlanta was better provided for. In the late 1940s, their athletes had use of 'a little purpose built changing room (with) room downstairs to change, and there were showers upstairs.'¹⁹¹ Few athletes before the war, however, had access to showers, and many would just put warm clothes on and go home to change after training. At Coventry Godiva, although this had improved by the fifties, conditions were still poor. In 1955, the club complained to the council that the ladies' changing

¹⁸⁸ Abrahams and Crump, *Athletics*, p. 37.

¹⁸⁹ *Athletics Today*, 10 May 1990, Vol. 4, No. 19, p. 18.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Betty and David Smith.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Beryl Randle.

rooms were in a 'filthy condition'.¹⁹² The problem of a lack of facilities was a national concern. In 1952, the AAA Annual Report, argued that although a significant number of tracks had been laid in the last twelve months, an additional sixteen was needed in the next year, if they were to reach half the 'very reasonable target of two hundred for the country'.¹⁹³

The lack of facilities in Britain was highlighted when indoor racing was introduced. The first national indoor championships was held at Wembley in 1935. This provided sprinters with competition in April, just before the summer track season. Conditions were hardly ideal, but an annual championship was organised until 1939, and again after 1962. A few women's races were available in the fifties, and the number increased during the subsequent decade. Between November 1959 and April 1960, five indoor meetings were arranged for male and female athletes at RAF Stanmore.¹⁹⁴ Not all athletes returned after their first experience of indoor competition. Betty Loakes competed in East Anglia, where they had marked out a flat track in a concrete hanger. The whole track was estimated to be 180 yards long, and as the heat increased in the building, the floor 'sweated', causing the athletes to slip.

While one cannot dispute the growing popularity of women's athletics, there was less evidence that it ever caught the imagination of the public. The WAAA Championships, which was arguably the best opportunity to see top class British women's athletics, not to mention a few foreign stars, was consistently unable to attract significant crowds. Consequently, athletes had to compete in arenas with little atmosphere, in front of near empty stands. Once women's athletics was no longer a

¹⁹² General Committee, 14 Dec. 1955.

¹⁹³ The Times, 12 Aug. 1952. The number of tracks in Britain was somewhat less than some other European countries. In 1960, it was reported that there were 195 tracks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland compared to 730 in Finland. See The Report Of The Wolfenden Committee, 'Sport and the Community' (1960), p. 35.

¹⁹⁴ Athletics Weekly, 12 Sept. 1959, Vol. 13, No. 37, p. 14.

novelty, the situation got worse. Performances were praised at the 1951 championships, in particular the world record by Sheila Lerwill in the high jump, but it was also noted that they were carried out in front of 'one of the smallest crowds' recorded. More worrying still, the situation did not improve as the decade progressed.¹⁹⁵ In 1957, both the junior and intermediate age groups were included in the WAAA Championships. However, this did not significantly increase the number of supporters, and the crowd still consisted largely of competitors' relatives, coaches and close friends. By the late fifties, the range of sporting choices that the public had, was recognised as one of the reasons why the crowd was so disappointing:

The attendance was, unfortunately, depressingly low, mainly no doubt because of the clash with the sound and TV broadcasts from Wimbledon, (tennis) Henley (rowing) and Trent Bridge (cricket).¹⁹⁶

Fortunately, this did not put women off from entering the sport. An examination of the number of participants is the best way of discovering how popular the individual events were. It has not been possible to find accurate records of the size of fields, due largely to the lack of archive material kept by the clubs and associations. Programmes do give some indication, although these merely contain a list of all those entered, rather than those actually competing. Cross country fields were estimated by competitors to contain around fifty athletes in the inter-war years. Numbers gradually increased. In the 1956 National Junior Cross Country Championships, twelve teams entered, with an additional seven clubs represented by one or two individuals. Altogether, one hundred girls competed, showing a big improvement in support from the years immediately following the war. In 1948, for

¹⁹⁵ J. Robinson, 'WAAA Championships 1957', *Athletics Weekly*, 14 Jul. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 27, p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ R. Kerslake, 'Women's AAA Championships', *Athletics Weekly*, 13 Jul., 1957, Vol. 11, No. 28, p. 10.

instance, the national junior race had had an entry of thirteen clubs, and seventy-six athletes. The continued growth of the sport cannot be fully appreciated, until one realises that the Women's National Cross Country Championships now has over four hundred finishers. The number of female competitors is further swelled by four younger age groups.¹⁹⁷

Although the entries were low in comparison with today's competitions, the average size of cross country fields, in the fifties was much better than the equivalent road walking championships. In 1955, a mere six teams and one individual entered.¹⁹⁸ The summer events remained the most popular, but there was a great difference in the number of athletes who supported the various disciplines. The mile was probably the least popular of the track events. In the senior WAAA Championships of 1953, the race was a straight final with seventeen competitors.¹⁹⁹ The 1960 MCWAAA Junior Shot Putt Championship was only contested by five athletes, representing four clubs. This was, however, an increase of two from the year before. The MCWAAA Intermediate Discus Championship of 1960 attracted six athletes, but these were drawn from only three clubs. This would have been a worrying development, as it represented a fall from sixteen athletes and seven clubs in 1959.²⁰⁰

While senior national championships usually attracted a larger entry, the area associations did struggle to match those fields. The 1953 National Senior Road Walk Championships had forty-six athletes entered from eight clubs.²⁰¹ Four years later, the

¹⁹⁷ Senior women are now classified as over twenty years old. The four remaining age groups are under twenty, under seventeen, under fifteen and under thirteen. No one under eleven can compete in these championships.

¹⁹⁸ Programme from National Junior Road Walk Championships, 3 Dec. 1955 at Perry Barr in Birmingham. Programme held at NCAL.

¹⁹⁹ The Times, 6 Jul. 1953.

²⁰⁰ See event programmes, held at NCAL.

²⁰¹ The race was held on 24 Jan. 1953. See event programme, held at NCAL.

MCWAAA Senior Road Walk Championships had an entry of thirty-seven athletes, drawn from five clubs. Bearing in mind that this area had the strongest tradition in women's walking, it is unlikely that either the northern or the southern championships had larger fields. In 1960, the MCWAAA Senior Cross Country Championships had an entry list of sixty-four athletes, but was supported only by a minority of its clubs. It was a case of the traditional cross country clubs remaining strong, rather than many new names appearing.²⁰²

The Financial Cost of Competing in Athletics

It has been argued that leisure in the inter-war years was 'less differentiated by region and class.'²⁰³ As this was the era that women's athletics was first introduced and then became established in England, it was not altogether surprising that women from a variety of classes participated. However, as we have said already, athletics was, and still is, a physically demanding sport, and this meant it remained closed to the vast majority of upper-class women. Dominant social attitudes had long asserted that 'rude health and abundant vigour are considered somewhat plebeian (while) timidity, which commonly accompanies feebleness, are held more ladylike'. Certainly, the supposed fragility of the female body was continually put forward as a reason not to expand athletic programmes in the twentieth century.²⁰⁴ Nevertheless, the first women's club, as we have seen, was largely made up of middle-class women, all in higher education. One or two wealthier women did manage to join them. One example was Sophie Elliott-Lynn, who trained for the javelin while on safari. She was, however, very much an exception and the very wealthy were not really represented.

²⁰² 13 Feb. 1960, Wordsley, near Stourbridge. See event programme, held at NCAL.

²⁰³ For more detail see Stevenson, British Society 1918-45, p. 401.

²⁰⁴ Cited in P. McIntosh Physical Education in England Since 1800 (1972), p. 127.

Despite the thirties being characterised an age of economic depression, many people experienced a higher standard of living during the inter-war period. Working hours were shorter, and with the establishment of paid holidays, there was more possibility for a greater number of people to enjoy leisure. This trend continued in the forties, and although living expenses had risen by fifty percent by 1944, the average wage had increased by 81½ percent.²⁰⁵ Athletics was undoubtedly one of the cheaper sports available to people, with the main advantage being that coaches were not paid at local clubs. Roma Ashby, who came from what she described as 'a very working-class background in Coventry', recalled that 'there was no wealth (in her family), you didn't need it for athletics, which was just as well because there wasn't any wealth at all.'²⁰⁶

The sport had other attractions for poorer sportsmen and women. Most open races offered prizes and, as has been explained earlier, the handicapping method meant that athletes of all abilities had a chance to win. Many prizes were useful, especially for those trying to set up a home. In the fifties there were even events called 'furniture meetings'. Some athletes won items such as a fireside chair, wardrobe and dressing table. Cutlery had long been a regular prize, as were silver rose bowls, various items of cut glass, carriage clocks, scent bottles and dressing table sets. Although regular competitors might find themselves with more than one of the same item and often gave them away to relatives, some of the companies who donated prizes allowed athletes to exchange them for something else of the same value. Not only open meetings offered prizes. They were also awarded in handicap events held during the WAAA Championships. In times of economic hardship, the possibility of winning useful prizes must have been an incentive. The value of women's prizes had always been five guineas (£5.25), but by the fifties had increased

²⁰⁵ J. Walvin, *Leisure and Society 1830-1950* (1978), p. 148.

²⁰⁶ Interview with Roma White.

to seven guineas (£7.35), compared to a maximum of ten guineas (£10.50) for men. The value to some athletes, however, was far greater as

you could actually get something quite useful for seven guineas around that time ... it was quite, well worth running for. Of course, they were in prizes; they weren't readily convertible, but handy nevertheless!²⁰⁷

Athletes would pay annual subscriptions to join a club and then a small sum to use the track. The cost of entering a race was low and, as we have seen, many clubs contributed towards championship costs. Open races cost a shilling to enter, and for athletes who only competed in local areas the cost of travel remained low. Many people cycled or walked to and from training, regarding it as part of their fitness schedule. Mary Bartlett regularly walked between three and four miles from her house to the Birchfield Harriers ground. She thought of it as part of her training, but the real reason was that if she caught the bus both ways it would have used all her available money.²⁰⁸ Walking and cycling added to the fitness of the athletes, and should be taken into consideration when assessing how light the average schedule was.

Nevertheless, one would not want to exaggerate how cheap the sport was. When competition necessitated longer journeys, some athletes struggled to cover the cost. For invitational and international races, the promoter would often send a train ticket for the athlete. However, any additional costs, such as buses to and from the station were not reimbursed. This caused financial hardship as Betty Loakes recalled,

when I went to a floodlit invitational race (in the mid-fifties), the train was late and from there I had to take a taxi, and I when I went to claim

²⁰⁷ Interview with David Smith.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Mary Bartlett.

for the taxi, twelve and six pence, it was if I'd asked for ... "oh no you can't have that! You won't be an amateur any longer." Well that was quite as much as I earned in a week ... I mean to pay twelve and six pence for a taxi, well it left me in queer street for the week!²⁰⁹

On some occasions, fellow athletes alleviated the cost of competing away from one's local area. Club members would provide accommodation in their own homes for other competitors. In this way, the network of female athletes around the country was able to reduce the costs of competing and enable teams to travel. As has already been indicated, most international athletes were working, but for those on low incomes, the cost of competition could put them off continuing in the sport. Track athletes had to purchase spikes and all competitors needed race kit. It was not necessary, however, to have anything special to wear when not competing. Before the tracksuit became popular in the fifties, most people wore casual trousers and jumpers.

There appears to have been an effort by some clubs at least, to keep costs as low as possible in order to allow individuals to join, whatever their income. Committee members were aware of the financial hardship that some of their members experienced. Subsequently they often helped with entry fees and travel expenses, particularly in the inter-war years. At Coventry Godiva Harriers, where Roma Ashby's father was treasurer after the war, the cost of joining the club was kept purposely low. As we have seen, athletes did struggle, however, when the WAAA Championships was organised over two days, from 1952. The number of entries had continued to increase, necessitating more heats. The following year, the BHLS committee noted that the 'athletes (are) finding great difficulty in obtaining leave of absence.' In addition, accommodation costs had to be found if athletes stayed in London. For Betty Loakes, who had to travel from a village in Northamptonshire, this

²⁰⁹ Interview with Betty Smith.

meant loss of wages and was something she could ill afford. She was paid hourly and also lost money when she competed in weekday meetings.²¹⁰

Similarly, international duty caused difficulties for some athletes, both male and female. If they were fortunate to secure time off work, they did so without pay and few could afford this. Betty Loakes competed at the 1958 European Championships, and was away for ten days. Although she was proud to be selected, she 'dreaded (championships) as far as financially was concerned'.²¹¹ Audrey Court, who went to Birmingham University before the Second World War, was not faced with these problems, but she can remember athletes who were:

there were quite a few civil servants in the (international) team ... there were very few what I call factory women, just because of the fact that times were hard and if you got a job you jolly well held on to it ... In fact there was only two who worked in factories on the (1936) Olympic team, no only the one, (Chalmers), sorry I was thinking of the European team. She was a remarkable athlete, who I think could have gone further if she'd had some sort of a more comfortable background.²¹²

This problem was of course not limited to women, but was a problem for all working-class athletes. In 1937 the Empire Games was held in Australia. The boat journey there and back, together with the competition, necessitated three months away from home. It was reported that several athletes had to decline selection, as they could not take this amount of time off work, nor afford to lose the pay. Due to the policy of not paying athletes 'loss of time', which meant they could not be paid their

²¹⁰ Interview with Betty Smith.

²¹¹ Interview with Audrey Court.

²¹² Interview with Audrey Court.

wages while representing their country, individuals only received 'bare travelling and hotel expenses. Any expenses incurred at home, lost time or pocket money on the trip has to be born by the athlete.'²¹³ Therefore, it is probable that many capable athletes were limited to domestic competition for financial reasons.

For the 1956 Olympics, the only women profiled in the athletics press who were not in paid employment were women looking after their family and home. Throughout the fifties, the majority of athletes indicated that they were in a variety of clerical positions, many being short-hand typists. Several others were clerks or receptionists. Only one athlete, namely Bertha Crowther in 1950, stated that she was a physical training instructress, although one would expect the frequency to increase as the decade continued.²¹⁴ Both the leading thrower in Britain, Susan Platt, and sprinter Heather Armitage were teachers. Other exceptions to the clerical positions were Thelma Hopkins, who trained as a dentist in the mid-fifties, Joy Jordan, a government scientific worker, Nora Smalley, a medical laboratory technician, Pam Seabourne, a machinist, and Diane Leather, a micro-analyst. Margaret Francis, a sprinter and hurdler in the fifties, deserves a mention, as she practised as a doctor in addition to competing, something that defeated Roger Bannister, as well as many other not so famous athletes.

Before moving on to look at international athletics in detail, it is perhaps worth reiterating just what club athletics meant to those involved. Athletes spoke of the pride they felt in representing their local club, which in turn represented the area they lived in. Some women stated that athletics enabled them to increase their self-confidence, and develop their physical health and well-being. Friendships were made, a great deal of fun was had and, on occasion, husbands were met. Women were able

²¹³ de Roeck, *A History of Rotherham Harriers*, p.70.

²¹⁴ *Daily Express*, 24 Aug. 1950. *Athletics Weekly* regularly interviewed athletes and indicated what job they did. Please refer to the questionnaires that have already been listed in this chapter, footnote 53, pp. 83 - 84.

to travel all over Britain to represent their club, and in this way experienced more freedom than many other women in the period. The desire for competition and training was of course the main reason that people joined a club, but the fun and social side of domestic athletics was just as important in maintaining their interest.²¹⁵

Women were also provided with the opportunity to occupy decision-making positions in their club. In the inter-war years in particular, this was not something that many women were able to achieve. In sport, which has remained very male-dominated, it has always been rare to find women in positions of power and influence. Women's athletics was therefore quite unusual, even when compared to today's sporting organisations. As officials, coaches, and judges, they were able to influence the development of the sport in their local areas, and as was demonstrated in the last chapter, at national level as well. They were not passive by-standers, but actively encouraged other women to participate in athletics, and subsequently helped to establish training and competition. Women's athletics in England therefore provides an example of women being involved at all levels of a sport, and of them influencing the direction of their own participation.

²¹⁵ Interview with Betty Smith.

Chapter Three

WOMEN'S ATHLETICS GOES INTERNATIONAL, 1918-1939

Having looked at domestic women's athletics in England, the international developments of the sport will now be covered. The aim of this chapter is to show when English teams first participated in international athletics, and what this type of competition was like before the Second World War. It would of course be impossible to look at England in isolation. Therefore, some information will be provided on the initial growth of women's athletics within the United States of America and the prominent European nations. This allows some comparison to be made between developments in England and other countries. The struggle to get women's athletics accepted into the Olympic Games is also included, although not in detail, as this is one area that has been covered by other writers on women's sport. The level of success achieved by the British women's international team is discussed, as is the response to their participation before the Second World War.

From Pioneer to the Opponent of Competition: Women's Track and Field in the United States

If England has a competitor for the title of the first sporting nation it is the United States, particularly so in the case of women's sports. A minority of privileged American women participated in athletic events during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Despite the sport never being as popular as it was in Europe, track and field was introduced into the women's universities during the 1890s; some twenty

years before the first college girls participated in England. At Vassar College, athletics was taught from 1897 and records kept from 1904.¹

However, by the time that European women were beginning to take part in modern athletics, American opinion expressed concern about the dangers of physical sports and the introduction of competition for women. By the 1920s, the vast majority of physical educators in America supported the 'play days' and 'telegraphic meets' that were introduced during this period. 'Play days' consisted of teams that included students from several institutions, so that no one college was represented by a single team. The emphasis was firmly upon fun and a social evening was usually held afterwards. Telegraphic meets were not 'meetings' at all, and were only suitable for individual sports like track and field or swimming. The results were wired to other schools and compared, but no direct competition was entered into. Competitiveness was viewed as a male characteristic that led to aggression, selfishness and the masculine development of a muscular physique. In addition, it was feared that competitive sport created a situation in which girls could be exploited by their college or employer. Finally, there was the continuing anxiety that physical sports would harm the reproductive ability of American, upper-class women and would ultimately weaken the nation.²

In 1929, Dr Frederick Rand Rogers of the New York State Department argued that all competitive sport was inadvisable for females. He claimed that women were ill suited to sport and that their participation violated nature. According to Rogers, feminists who supported the right of females to be involved in competitive sports, were simply concerned with 'destroying femininity in women' at what ever the cost to society. Specialists in an elite sport became less attractive, 'physically, emotionally and socially'. He argued that this was a greater concern for women than men, because

¹ M. Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation in Summer Olympic Games 1900-1948', (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio State University, 1974), pp. 93-94.

² A. Guttmann, Women's Sports. A History (New York 1994), pp. 135-137.

in his view, such women would be unable to attract a suitable husband. It was therefore the duty of physical educators, as well as parents, to warn girls that they risked 'impaired health, physical beauty and social attractiveness' when participating in such activities.³

Greater concern was expressed over the behaviour of socially privileged women, and critics appeared to ignore the fact that working-class women had long been involved in heavy, physical labour. Unsurprisingly, there had been no fears expressed about the effect such effort would have on their reproductive organs or 'feminine' graces. Although some wealthier women experienced more freedom during the twenties, Guttmann has warned against seeing the period as a 'golden age' for women's sport. He points out that it was the 'flapper', and not the career girl, which was the typical type of woman during this decade. While the former was not ignorant of the appeal of a well toned body, she could not be called in any sense a serious sportswoman. Rather such girls were aware that to be too competitive or too 'sporty' would open the way to criticism, and would be detrimental to her ultimate goal of securing a husband and settling down. Sport for these wealthy women remained very much a pastime not to be taken too seriously.⁴

Not everyone in America felt that competitive sport was harmful to women. Many of the students themselves supported inter-collegiate athletics, although their views were rejected by those in control. The male-dominated Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), also felt that the nation's women should have the same physical opportunities as European women in the 1920s. National pride, and concern that their female population would fall behind in physical prowess, was undoubtedly a reason for this. American teams, therefore, competed at the Women's Olympic Games of 1922 and annual national championships were held from 1923, sponsored by the AAU. Results from these, and other contemporary competitions, reveal that teams sponsored by

³ Dr. F. R. Rogers, 'Olympics For Girls?' *School and Society*, 30 (1929), pp. 190-194.

⁴ Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, pp. 135-136.

industrial leagues, and largely working-class in membership, dominated track and field rather than the educational institutions.

Several companies provided sponsorship for women's track teams, covering the cost of kit, travel, accommodation and food. Prudential Insurance, New York Central Railroad, Equitable Life and the Employers' Casualty Department were all represented by teams in the 1920s and early 1930s. Large firms such as the Employers' Casualty Department recruited staff specifically to compete in their athletic teams. This practice was not unusual in men's sport, but critics argued it was 'moral laxity and exploitation' when applied to women.⁵ In response to the decision of the AAU to send a team to Paris, opposition educationalists formed the Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation (WDNAAF), in 1923. The WDNAAF argued that competitive sport resulted in less facilities and time for those not performing at the top level. Instead, women's sport should be organised for the benefit of all and purely for fun.

Early Competition in Europe and the Establishment of the Women's International Governing Body

In contrast to the non-competitive modes of sport increasingly practised in the United States, Europe favoured activities along similar lines to those performed by men. In 1904, Germany had introduced races for women, which appears to be the first example of official women's athletics in Europe. These competitions were rare, however, and a governing body was not founded until 1919, when the Deutsche Sportbehörde für Leitathletik decided to form a section catering for women and girls. The first women's championship was held in 1921, although smaller meetings had been organised in both 1919 and 1920. The 1920s saw a resurgence of interest in

⁵ W. Meisl, 'The Babe', World Sports, Nov. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 34. See also Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', pp. 343-345.

physical activity for females in Germany, with many thousands of sports clubs now catering for women as well as men. In 1921, The Times reported on the Grosse Preis at Grunewald race-course, which was on the outskirts of Berlin. Like most meetings at this time it was an all-German contest, and consisted of 'footracing, swimming and boxing matches.' Girls, it was noted, took 'an active part in all possible forms of racing.' The following year the Deutsche Kampfspiele was held in Berlin and six hundred women competed.⁶

Women's world record lists had existed since 1919, while some countries had begun to record the achievements of female athletes even earlier. Finland and Sweden, neither of whom had representatives at the first women's internationals, have records dating from 1913. This is also given as the date when a Russian woman was credited by her federation to have broken the 100 metre world record. According to Gabriel Korobkov, who was the chief athletics coach of the USSR in 1956, Nina Popava ran the 100 metres in 13.1 seconds in 1913, when the official world record was 13.2 seconds. The existence of such lists, however, should not be seen as evidence that a great deal of competitive activity was occurring in these countries.⁷

Several German sportswomen recorded 'records' during the 1920s, but these remained unofficial, as their country was not accepted as a member of any international sporting federation for some years after the First World War. Their teams were therefore absent from the initial women's international championships. There was some competition provided within Germany, mainly organised by the Arbeiter Turn - und Sportbund (ATSB), which was run by German socialists. Women were involved in surprisingly large numbers, despite their misgivings over the leadership's treatment of them. A series of 'Worker's Olympics' were organised by the ATSB during the inter-war years, in a challenge to the IOC, and these

⁶ 13 Jul. 1921.

⁷ Gabriel Korobkov, 'Russia's Rise - My Inside Story', World Sports, Aug. 1955, Vol. 22, No. 8, p. 5.

competitions revealed the high standard that some German women had achieved in track and field. The organisation may well have failed to live up to its manifesto of equality, but their championships did at least give a prominence to women that was not found in any other mixed international games during the inter-war years.⁸

In 1917, two years before Germany's governing body was established, Austria's AAA, The Council of Österreichischer Leichtathletik-Verband, was founded. This officially assumed responsibility for women's athletics with the aim of encouraging specific female sections within the country's clubs. Austria held the first officially sanctioned championships for women in 1918. The French federation was formed in the same year as Austria's, in 1917, with three clubs. By 1925 this had risen to four hundred. The beginnings of French athletic activity for women had actually begun some years earlier and, even during the First World War, upper-class Parisian women had the socially exclusive Fémina-Sport and Academia Clubs available to them. These clubs were founded in 1911 and 1915 respectively and, on 1 May 1915, Academia staged the country's first female track meeting at the Stade Brancion, Paris.

The first Austrian club to accept women members was the Vienna Association Football Club followed by the Danubia Women's Swimming Club. Both clubs organised women's athletic events in 1917 and, in 1918, the Vienna Association sent a team to Budapest in order to try to initiate interest in Hungary. This could be recognised as the first international athletic meeting by women although it is not clear if it was competition in the true sense but rather a demonstration. The first women's international events to be held in Austria were as part of a mixed match in September 1920. Female athletes participated from Berlin and Vienna in the long jump, 100

⁸ Guttman, *Women's Sports*, pp. 160-165. He gives one example of the German women's strength in this period. At the 1925 Arbeiter-Olympiad at Frankfurt, their 4x100 metre relay team set a new world record. For information on British women's workers' sports, see J. Hargreaves, *Sporting Females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports* (1994), pp. 140-141.

metres and discus. The German women won both the sprint and long jump but when a return match was held in Berlin in 1921 the Viennese women won all three events. While the Monte Carlo Match of 1921 was the first time women competed in a full programme internationally, the Austrian organisation was responsible for establishing the first women's international event.⁹

Several other European countries established governing bodies for women's athletics during this period. Poland set up its federation in 1919 and Belgium founded the Federation Sportive Feminine Belge in 1921. A year after the English Women's Amateur Athletic Association was created in 1922, Italy established their Feminine Athletic Federation, and Argentina followed suit two years later. Czechoslovakia, which was to provide the first challenge to the English team, already had a strong tradition of physical culture from which to build and they provided many of the early record holders. Their first international match was against Austria in 1922, where they demonstrated their strength by dominating the competition. Outside Europe, only Japan and Canada were regular competitors in the twenties although activity was reported in China by 1930. During April of that year, the first national championships were held for both men and women. In 1933, The Times published a report on the recent changes within China and mentioned a large athletics meeting for both boys and girls at Nanking.¹⁰

While the war was seen as encouraging women's physical activities, supporters feared that once hostilities ceased and women rapidly returned to their

⁹ Guttman, Women's Sports, p. 165 and Webster, History, Development And Training, pp. 11-16.

¹⁰ 'Changing China', 5 Dec. 1933. The article reported that there was a 'great athletics meeting at Nanking, where 2,000 entrants from all parts of the country, girls as well as youths, competed for ten days in a huge stadium filled with thousands of spectators.' Two photographs were published, one showing a woman throwing a javelin and the other showing four female athletes, probably a relay team. Details on the other countries are included in Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women, pp. 10-16.

traditional work and domestic roles that their interest would wane. According to Webster, this is precisely what did occur, with female interest in 'masculine' sports such as athletics receding. Nevertheless, women's athletics did not die out in Europe but, instead, continued to expand. This would seem to be largely a result of the actions of Madame Milliat, who was responsible for nine conferences on the subject between 1921 and 1936.¹¹ She was a dedicated feminist who believed that women's suffrage could help bring about acceptance and recognition of women's sports. Unlike most feminists, who traditionally had little if any interest in sport, Madame Milliat felt that political enfranchisement could benefit women's sporting opportunities. During the 1934 Women's World Games she emphasised these beliefs in an interview published in Independent Woman:

Women's sports of all kinds are handicapped in my country by the lack of playing space. As we have no vote, we cannot make our needs publicly felt, or bring pressure to bear in the right quarters. I always tell my girls that the vote is one of the things they will have to work for if France is to keep its place with other nations in the realm of feminine sport.¹²

Why France was so active in pioneering women's athletics can be explained by the emphasis which was placed on physical activities in the years following the First World War. Although the interest in sports during the inter-war period was a phenomenon common to the entire western world, France has been recognised as leading the way. The 'war psychology' was transferred to the realm of sports with a

¹¹ Guttman, Women's Sports, pp. 161-162. The nine conferences were held at Paris, Gothenburg, Amsterdam, Prague, Vienna, Berlin and London.

¹² 'Women's World Games Dramatize Women's Athletics', Oct. 1934, p. 336. This is cited in Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', pp. 161-162.

nationalistic fervour, as each country demonstrated its individual strength free from any balances of power. Eugenics certainly played their part. The lack of physical activities for women in France was criticised by hygienists and nationalists, who argued that their subsequent ill health was 'harmful to the race'. The country's pride needed to be restored, and in this atmosphere 'competitive athletics was no longer repugnant for women, but rather was absolutely necessary for the resurgence of the nation'. The French government encouraged sports and athletics for women and they were taught to girls in schools. Officials felt that 'the inevitable result of strenuous athletic activity ... would be 'a healthy, intelligent womanhood.' The environment in the twenties was therefore ideal for the emergence of organised sports for women.¹³

Contemporary thought in the post-war world, stressed the role of women as mothers of the next generation. There was obviously anxiety about the birth rate and the need for the lost male generation to be replaced. It was increasingly argued that women should do some exercise in order to better their own health, and so improve the chances of having healthy children for the benefit of their country. Madame Milliat was something of a eugenicist herself, but one would not wish to argue that this alone motivated her to fight so hard for women to play their part in the sporting world. While remaining very much a woman of her time, she did feel that all females had a rightful place in every sphere of society not just sport. She proudly claimed that

France has the honour of having been at the forefront of this (sporting) movement ... We are aware of having worked for the betterment of women, whatever class of society she comes from, to have helped her become a healthier human being, both morally and physically, having no fear of her responsibilities and also ready to demand that her rights

¹³ L. Engelmann, The Goddess And The American Girl. The Story of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Wills (New York 1988), p. 18.

be respected in every domain without losing the grace that has always been her charm.¹⁴

By 1919, Madame Milliat was president of the Fédération des Sociétés Féminines de France (FSFSF) and had organised women's championships in field hockey, football, basket-ball and swimming. By 1920, events were being included for schoolgirls and, encouraged by the success of the FSFSF, the decision was made to hold a Festival of Women's Sport at Monte Carlo in 1921. Initially known as the 'Reunion Internationalé d'Education Physique Féminine et des Sports', this meeting has been recognised as saving the fragile women's athletics movement and inspiring more interest, particularly in England. Not all the credit, however, should be given to Madame Milliat or indeed to any single woman. Camille Blanc, who was the Mayor of Beaulieu and president of an international sporting club in Monaco that catered for the wealthy sectors of French society, decided that Monte Carlo would be the ideal place to host a festival of sport in 1921 for upper-class females. Aided by an eight-man committee, he organised the first major women's international athletics meeting and set the movement in motion.¹⁵

The French organisers of the 1921 Monte Carlo Games approached several countries in order to invite women to participate, and in the case of England, where there was no women's governing body in existence, they contacted the Sporting Life newspaper. The paper does not indicate why it was chosen as the starting point for communication but presumably the French organisers selected it because of its reputation, which extended beyond England to foreign athletes. Unlike in later years,

¹⁴ This is taken from the prologue, written by Madame Milliat and printed on the front page of the official programme of the 1922 Women's Olympics. This is cited in Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', p. 164.

¹⁵ Webster, Athletics of To-Day, p. 28 and Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', p. 158.

during the twenties the Sporting Life covered a broad range of sporting activities and had yet to confine itself largely to horse racing.

Fortunately for English women athletes of the future, the Deputy Editor of Sporting Life instructed Mr Joe Palmer to take an interest in the request. He subsequently approached Major Marchant, who had recently been employed at London's Regent Street Polytechnic as Director of Physical Education. In spite of traditional and enduring attitudes that athletics was not a suitable sport for 'ladies', the team was drawn exclusively from the ladies' Polytechnics and therefore represented a relatively privileged sector of British society. As athletics had never been taught at the Polytechnics, girls who attended physical drill classes were asked to undertake training on Saturday afternoons under the guidance of Mr Palmer. The facilities at Paddington Recreation Ground were far from perfect, as can be seen from the fact that hurdling practice was carried out using 'a pole perched upon two sticks'.

After a period of training, trials were held and a team of eighteen was selected, seven of whom were athletes: Misses Birchenough, (throws) Cast, (60m) Fuller and Hatt (60m, and high jump), Lines (60m and 250m), Russel (60m) and Wright (60m), thus gained the honour of being the first women to officially represent England in athletics. The action by Sporting Life and more specifically by Joe Palmer and Major Marchant, both of whom were involved in the founding of the Women's Amateur Athletic Association in 1922, meant that England was involved from the earliest days of international competition. In addition to France which was represented by fifty-eight competitors, and England, three other countries were involved in the one-day meeting, namely Switzerland with eighteen athletes, Italy with ten, and Norway with seven. Provision and facilities were very different from those experienced by modern day international athletes. Following a journey of thirty six hours by boat and train, the competition began on Friday 10 March, giving the athletes one day to recover. The events were held at the Stade du Tir on the old pigeon shooting ground, just in front of the casino. The track was the shape of a half-moon, uneven and situated on a slope. Despite being inexperienced, the English team

enjoyed a successful athletic debut in Monte Carlo, which undoubtedly contributed to the burgeoning of interest and activity over the next few years.¹⁶

The number of spectators for the early women's meetings was surprisingly high and one could certainly argue that the 'novelty' value of watching women participate in physical activities was one explanation. The event was undoubtedly a success, not only for England where the resulting interest led to the beginnings of domestic organisation, but also from the perspective of Madame Milliat whose plans now centred on the formation of an international association. Only five months after the first international event had been held, a meeting was called by Madame Milliat in order to set up a Women's International Athletic Federation, the *Fédération Sportive Féminine Internationale* (FSFI). Present at the meeting were representatives from France, Great Britain, The United States of America, Italy and Czechoslovakia. There has been some dispute over who was the sixth nation in attendance. Webster lists Spain while Simri names Switzerland. The evidence suggests that Simri is correct. Switzerland had been involved in the 1921 international whereas Spain was not mentioned, which suggests the former was more likely to have been invited by Madame Milliat.¹⁷

According to an FSFI pamphlet, published in 1936, the federation was established in response to the refusal of the existing male organisations to interest themselves in female developments. The main aim of the FSFI, which was to smooth relations between all existing women's national federations, was set out at this inaugural meeting. Rules for both organisation and competition were agreed upon. The FSFI also stated that they would be the sole body with the authority to verify

¹⁶ The team's success was led by Mary Lines. She won the long jump, 60 metres and 250 metres, was second in the 800 metres, and was part of the winning 300 and 800 metre relay teams. She also placed joint-first in the high jump with fellow English athlete, Hilda Hatt. Altogether, the team won six golds, two silvers and one bronze. See Webster, *Athletics of To-Day*, pp. 28-32.

¹⁷ U. Simri, *A Concise World History of Women's Sport* (Netayna 1983), p. 47.

women's world records. The momentum of the women's athletic movement continued into 1922. During this year, the FSFI became an organisation controlled exclusively by women. Madame Milliat persuaded all men holding leadership positions to step down, and thus fulfilled her wishes that women could and should be responsible for controlling the destiny of their own sports.¹⁸

This inaugural committee meeting of the FSFI had been held the day after the first match between France and Great Britain. The Times noted the interesting fact that in addition to the athletics, the 1921 meeting included a football match between an unnamed French team and Plymouth Ladies Association Football Club.¹⁹ The first meeting to be held under the authority of the fledgling FSFI was organised in 1922. These games, which were also held at Monte Carlo, were described as 'the most comprehensive of its kind in modern times'. Some three hundred women competed from France, Italy, Great Britain, Switzerland, Denmark, Belgium, and Czechoslovakia. Despite facing a much improved Czechoslovakian team, the early supremacy of England was maintained as they won twelve out of fifteen events.

On 20 August 1922, the 'First Women's Olympic Games' was held at the Pershing Stadium in Paris. The programme of eleven disciplines was the most extensive yet. This was undoubtedly the most significant women's international event to be organised so far, and provided the movement with enhanced credibility and status. Although only five nations participated, the games signalled the seriousness of those responsible for women's athletics to the IAAF and IOC. The nationalistic

¹⁸ Information about the FSFI pamphlets is included in Leigh, The Evolution of Women's Participation, pp. 150-160.

¹⁹ The Times, 31 Oct. 1921. Mary Lines won the 100 yards in a world record of 11 4/5 seconds and later won the 300 metres. Britain won the match, scoring 48 points to France's 37. The Paris match included the 1,000 metres rather than 800 metres, which subsequently became the distance included in most international competition. There was also a 100 metre hurdle race, in place of the odd distances of 74 and 63 metres, which were included in Monte Carlo.

character of men's international sport, which some American women in particular were keen to avoid, was apparent from the first events organised by the FSFI. Competitors wore a national 'uniform' and were awarded points that contributed to their nation's final score. The English girls remained victorious, beating the United States team, which as Webster points out, the British men's team had never succeeded in doing.²⁰ Despite their success not all opinion was supportive. Doubts were again raised over whether women should be competing in public, and in all the events offered by the FSFI. According to the correspondent on the Manchester newspaper Athletic News, the first Women's Olympics was 'heralded as an indication that while our men are decadent our women are full blooded'. However, the correspondent was uncertain if women's involvement was a positive development. He admitted that he found it

rather a remarkable fact that as we have not been over keen in connection with public racing for women that the English girls should have won ... But there are doubts in many minds of the advisability of women racing - especially over what are called the longer distances ...

I confess to being a 'Doubting Thomas' with regard to the matter, and I know that many who like to see the girls take part in their school and college games are not at all keen on their public performances.²¹

As had been the case for the Monte Carlo meeting of 1921, the English team for the Women's Olympics was selected after trials held at Paddington Recreation Ground. Once again it consisted of those women fortunate enough to come from a background that enabled them to attend higher education, a fact that may have

²⁰ Webster, Athletics of To-Day for Women, p. 36.

²¹ 28 Aug. 1922. The Athletic News was published in Manchester.

contributed to the anxiety expressed by the Athletics News. However, unlike the men's teams of this period, there were no representatives from the Oxbridge Colleges. The women from the middle classes enjoyed the pioneering sporting opportunities that developed within their colleges during the second half of the nineteenth century. The same pattern continued in the twentieth century, as physical activity for women became more available and increasingly popular.²² As we have seen, some universities included a few women's athletic events in their annual sports day. At Birmingham University's sports day Phyllis Hall won both the half-mile and mile, and consequently was invited by the newly formed WAAA to run in the trials for the 1,000 metres. She won by some fifteen yards comfortably beating five other women. Her subsequent selection meant she was the first woman from the Midlands to represent England at athletics.

The Women's Olympic Games themselves were watched by a reported 20,000 spectators and were deemed a success by the organisers. As she was only one competitor at the Games, Phyllis Hall cannot be seen as representative of all the participants, but her recollections underlined the relaxed and friendly atmosphere in France, in spite of the competitive nature of the events. Webster's account fails to mention Miss Hall and states that Miss Batt finished third in the 1,000 metres. In fact, the former was placed third behind two French competitors, Mlle Lenoir and Mlle Breard, a performance that was warmly praised in News of the World. In her eyes at

²² As has been noted, there is unfortunately insufficient space in this thesis to discuss the developments in the nineteenth century. However, attention is drawn to K. McCrone, Sport and The Physical Emancipation of Women 1870-1914 (1988), J. Hargreaves, Sporting Females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994), and S. Fletcher, Women First: The Female Tradition in English Physical Education, 1880-1980 (1984). These all provide an excellent summary of this period.

least, this championship was as successful in the opinion of the athletes as it was for the officials.²³

Joe Binks, a former British record holder for the mile, was present at the meeting for News of the World and covered the meeting in detail. He wrote that 'there can be little doubt that track sports for women have come to stay'. The spectators watched with 'extraordinary interest', with the high jump particularly popular with the press. There was a reported 'army of photographers and cinema "fiends" (who) marched across the grass' in order to photograph women in a role so few people had ever seen them in. Policemen, who attended, restored calm and the meeting proceeded. In addition to praising Hall, Binks singled out Mary Lines as 'a truly remarkable little lady'. A second article in the paper agreed, commenting that Lines was 'the outstanding competitor in the British Ladies' Olympic team ... who had been cheered many times by the 20,000 spectators at the greatest athletic meeting in the world'.

In addition to enjoying their athletic successes, the teams enjoyed several social activities while in France. The day before the event opened, the athletes were taken to local places of interest, although it is doubtful if the English women would have taken part in this as they only arrived on this day. A banquet was arranged after the meeting from which the English team went directly to the station to begin their journey home. As well as prizes, bouquets were presented at the banquet for the winners of each event. Their performances had obviously had some impact at home. Lines described how 'there were plenty of people to meet us when we arrived at Victoria' who gave the team a 'hearty reception'.²⁴

²³ Interview with Phyllis Hall, 22. Feb. 1993. Phyllis Hall received a gold and diamond ring as her prize. Please refer to the appendix, p. 367, which provides a copy of the selection letter she received from the WAAA.

²⁴ News of the World, 27 Aug. 1922.

As was often the case during this period, another international meeting was held shortly after the close of the Women's Olympiad. These arrangements were probably made to minimise the costs incurred by teams travelling to races abroad. The association hosting an event met all expenses including transport, meals and accommodation. As all of them operated on very tight budgets, it was imperative to keep expenses as low as possible. The match that was held the following Sunday was not a full international, which is defined as when athletes represented their country, but was between three clubs from different nations. London Olympiads Athletic Club competed against the Femona Sports Club of Brussels and the Femina Athletic Club of Paris. The English club maintained their country's winning streak, but the continued success should not be taken as evidence that there was a large pool of women participating in the twenties. Several of the women doubled up, competing successfully in more than one event, to gain valuable points for their team. When one examines the results of contemporary competitions, it is clear that the number of elite female athletes was small.²⁵

The decision to hold a women's Olympiad every four years had been taken just prior to the match in Paris in 1922. It was undoubtedly an indication of the growing strength and success of the women's international athletics movement. However, it also led to the end of the Monte Carlo Meetings. Three years after the first meeting, the final festival of sport, now organised by Madame Milliat, was held in Monte Carlo in 1923. The majority of countries that had been represented in 1921 had athletes competing, namely France, Great Britain, Italy, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia. The only additional country was Belgium, which does rather suggest that athletics, while perhaps increasing in popularity in these nations, had not spread much further. With the establishment of the women's Olympiad, there was no need for a second multi-country international. In addition, the number of domestic competitions had increased for many of the competing nations. Together with the

²⁵ Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women, p. 39.

development of smaller international meetings, involving two or three countries, this meant there were now far more competitive opportunities, especially for sprinters.

The WAAA organised their first women's international on the August Bank holiday of 1924. The 'Women's International and British Games', as it was called, boasted a sponsor by the way of Mr W. Power-Berrey, editor of the News of the World newspaper. As we have seen, this newspaper, along with several others, was a supporter of women's athletics for many years, providing sponsorship and advertising space. The White City Stadium in London, which was the usual venue for men's internationals, was not made available to women until 1934, largely due to the opposition of the Amateur Athletic Association. Consequently, the women's international was held at the Chelsea Football Ground, at London's Stamford Bridge. Joe Binks described the meeting as a 'Mammoth Carnival' which would provide a 'Unique spectacle for August Bank Holiday'. He noted that

Great interest was aroused by the announcement that the 'News of the World' is promoting a gigantic athletic meeting at Stamford Bridge ... The programme will include a Women's Olympiad, and at least seven nations will be represented. No such meeting has been held in England and it is anticipated that some thrilling sport will be witnessed ... we can be sure that our girls will do their utmost to maintain their supremacy in athletics.²⁶

The meeting was listed as the most important sporting event to watch over the holiday. Open, scratch races for men and youths were also included, as well as some open races for women. The WAAA always liked to have additional open races to enable club athletes to have some competition, while the men's races were no doubt included to increase the interest of the public. General entertainment was also

²⁶ News of the World, 6 Jul. 1924.

provided, 'military pageants by the massed drums and fifes of the Brigade of Guards and gymnastic displays by girls from the London Polytechnic'. The nationalistic character of women's international athletics was continued at the meeting, which was organised along the lines of the Olympic Games. The teams paraded behind their country's flag in front of a crowd of 25,000, and they all wore a 'uniform' incorporating their nation's colours. The athletics programme took central stage and was presented by the Daily Mirror as England's contribution to the growing number of women's athletic events:

The advance among women of that branch of sport commonly known as athletics has been extraordinary, and in a very few years the movement has progressed from the inclusion of an odd race or two at men's meetings to highly organised sports for the fair sex.²⁷

Women's international athletics was on the sporting agenda again on 1 August 1925. The meeting, which was held under the auspices of the WAAA, was sponsored by the Daily Sketch and was described as 'a hugely successful' meeting.²⁸ The match was between Czechoslovakia, England and the first women's team to represent Canada. The competitiveness of individual athletes should not be underestimated in these matches, but this did not prevent encouragement being offered to the Canadians. When they arrived in England, F.A.M. Webster provided their team with some field event coaching. For the track disciplines they were helped by Sam Mussabini, who was a well-respected coach. International competition had always been seen to stimulate interest in sport. The involvement of Canada in their first international led to a growth in activity when the team returned home.²⁹ Although the Canadians were

²⁷ Daily Mirror, 4 Aug. 1924 and News of the World, 27 Jul. 1924.

²⁸ Sporting Life, 3 Aug. 1925.

²⁹ Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women, pp. 55-56.

the most successful women's team at the 1928 Olympics, the British spectators were able to enjoy the expected home victory in 1925 as England won by thirty points from Czechoslovakia.³⁰

The last international to be held in Britain during the twenties was also probably the most important for the English athletes. As is discussed in detail later in this chapter, it was decided not to send a women's team to the Amsterdam Olympic Games. In response to this decision, the Daily Sketch decided to sponsor a women's international at Stamford Bridge on 14 August 1928. Twelve nations were represented in this match, which was organised between a British Empire Team, French and German athletes. In addition to the scoring events, there were several open races including a demonstration 880 yards. Although referred to as a women's meeting, both male and female athletes, many of whom had been present at Amsterdam, participated. The meeting was organised to give the English women 'the opportunity they desire of matching their skill and physical strength against the best women athletes in the World'. The Daily Sketch published several articles advertising the event and on 2 August included a double page spread of photographs showing eight of the English athletes in training.³¹

In 1925, the Belgian Federation had decided that they would be unable to host the Second Women's Olympics the following year, as previously arranged. Although they had barely a year to make the arrangements the Swedish Federation, Sveriges Kvinnliga, agreed to be responsible for the Games instead. According to Webster,

³⁰ The Times, 3 Aug. 1925. Two new world records were set by British runners; Vera Searle (née Palmer) in the 250 metres and Miss Trickey in the 880 yards. Vera Searle was called Palmer at the time this record was set.

³¹ 'Women Athletes Great Day', 2 Aug. 1928, and 10 Aug. 1928. The countries represented were the British Empire, consisting of The British Isles, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New-Zealand, France, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Japan, Czechoslovakia and Poland. Results from this meeting can be found in both the Daily Sketch, 4 Aug. 1928 and The Times, 15 Aug. 1928.

most of the credit for this decision should go to Dr Einer Lilie who was to become President of the Sveriges Kvinnliga. He was a staunch supporter of women's sports and had actively promoted the increased participation of women in physical activities. It was Lilie who, together with the secretary of the WAAA, arranged for a British 'demonstration' trip to Sweden, which was recognised as being a significant factor in raising support for Swedish participation in FSFI activities.³²

Although it is discussed in detail later in this chapter, it is worth noting now that before the 1926 Swedish Games, the IOC announced that it had the sole right to use the name *Olympic Games*. Consequently the women's federations changed the name of their championships to the Second International Ladies Games, which is the title used in the Official Swedish Report on the Gothenburg Games. However, by the time the 1930 Games were held, the meetings were known as the Women's World Games, and the four-yearly meetings are often all referred to by this name. The Games, which was held in Gothenburg from the 27-29 August 1926, demonstrated just how much women's athletics had progressed during the last four years. Patronage was granted by HRH the Crown Prince and practical support was provided by Mrs Mary Von Sydow, wife of the Governor of the province, who worked as honorary chairman.

Ten nations entered the Games, which was an increase of four from the first Women's Olympics of 1922, although only eight competed. The countries present were stalwarts Belgium, Czechoslovakia, England, and France alongside newcomers Japan, Latvia, Poland and Sweden. Yugoslavia and Italy withdrew. It is apparent from

³² The Times, 9 Sept. 1925 and Webster, Athletics Of To-Day For Women, p61. In addition, the WAAA AGM minutes for 1925, describe how women's athletics had been struggling to establish itself in Sweden. In an attempt to revive interest, a few of the best women athletes travelled to Sweden and competed in several events. The WAAA committee minutes report that Misses Vera Palmer and Florence Birchenough accompanied Mrs Sophie Eliot-Lynn, while The Times wrote that Miss Hatt and Miss Hall went with Eliott-Lynn.

reports that the three days of competition were valued for being one of fun, with competitors, officials, and spectators enjoying the friendly atmosphere. However, the opening address by Mrs Von Sydow dismissed ideas that the athletes were not competitive. While remaining feminine, the athletes were described as having displayed 'the desire to conquer (as well as) the ability to accept defeat - sure signs of true sportswomanship.' The FSFI, and those that supported it, promoted athletics for women by using similar arguments to the ones that were used to promote sport for men:

The sporting ideals are fine ones. Sport is amusing, but it is by no means a frivolous amusement. Those who go in for sport in earnest, win physical and moral health, self-control and presence of mind - qualities, just as valuable to women as to men.

The organisation of these contests has been inspired by such noble ideas.³³

Contemporary reports indicated a high level of interest that was reflected in the large crowds. As the competition progressed, understanding and support replaced any lingering opposition to women participating. Not only European athletes enjoyed success in Gothenburg. Japan's inclusion allowed the considerable talents of Miss Kinuye Hitomi to be more widely known. Rumours had circulated before the competition began about her performances, but this was the first occasion that she competed in Europe. A brilliant all-rounder, Hitomi put her country firmly on the sporting map and stood alone as an athletic talent in her country at that time. She was the sole member of the Japanese team, only nineteen years old, yet she scored fifteen points to place fifth in the final medal table. Her performances undermined arguments

³³ '2nd International Ladies' Games. Gothenburg Aug. 27-29 1926', p. 13. This was the official report, describing the organisation of the Games and the competition itself.

that women athletes were restricted by poor physical strength.³⁴ The Second International Ladies' Games was, in the opinion of the organising committee, responsible for stimulating more support for women's athletics in Sweden, as well as increasing the numbers actively involved.³⁵ The report no doubt depicted a favourable view of the championships and was somewhat un-critical, but there is no question that the event was a success, strengthening the credibility of women's athletics. Gothenburg revealed that the sport was getting stronger despite the lack of interest shown by the IAAF and IOC. The male-dominated associations did, however, begin to express more interest in the development of women's athletics after this competition. It is probable that the success at Gothenburg influenced the IOC's decision, in 1926, to allow a limited range of athletic events for women in the Amsterdam Olympics. Once they realised that women's athletics was expanding, the men's associations wanted to gain more control over its development.

The programme at Gothenburg comprised thirteen events, which was two more than in 1922. This was the largest number of events yet to be held in a women's match, and both a 1,000 metres run and 1,000 metres walk were included. Opposition was still apparent to these longer events, with even Webster stating that concerns over women's participation in the 1,000 metres should not be dismissed. He did concede, however, that neither England's Miss Trickey, who won the Gothenburg 1,000 metres, nor the second placed Inga Gentzel of Sweden showed any signs of distress. Again Britain was successful in achieving the most points, winning by twenty three points from second placed France. This was to be the last major championships that

³⁴ Hitomi achieved gold medals in the standing and running long jump competitions, was second in the discus, third in the 100 metres, fifth in the 60 metres and sixth in the 250 metres. See the British Olympic Journal, Sept. 1931, Vol. 2, No. 8, p. 157.

³⁵ '2nd International Ladies' Games', pp. 11-13 and The Times, 28 Aug. 1926. Please note that detail on the IOC decision is provided in this chapter, under the sub-title 'The History of the Struggle to Gain Women's Events in the Olympic Games'.

England dominated, a factor that some have put down to their absence from the 1928 Olympic Games, in protest at the small number of women's events.³⁶

The number of countries actively involved in women's athletics continued to expand, and seventeen nations were present at the Women's World Games held in Prague in 1930.³⁷ The European nations continued to account for most of those represented, with teams from England, France, Italy, Holland, Sweden, Poland, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Austria, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Switzerland and of course the host country Czechoslovakia. Germany joined them for the first time, as their application to join the FSFI had been accepted at the fourth FSFI congress in 1926. The only two nations outside Europe to compete were Canada and Japan. Although cost may have been a limiting factor for some countries outside Europe, the eurocentricity of women's international athletics in this period was emphasised at Prague.

Part of the reason for the greater number of countries participating in Czechoslovakia, may have been the inclusion of five women's events in the 1928 Olympic Games. Despite subsequent controversy, the meeting provided significant press coverage in countries where women did not previously participate. The 1930 World Games were the first after the 1928 Olympics, and it was crucial that they were not marred by any controversy. Competition at Prague had an almost genteel quality, demonstrated when the Czechoslovak Ministry of Health opened proceedings with a garden party. A crowd of 15,000 witnessed the three days of competition that

³⁶ Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women, includes a full list of results from this meeting. Results were also published in The Times, 28 Aug. 1926. See also Simri, A Concise World History, pp. 53-54.

³⁷ The Times, 6 Sept. 1930, reports that there were sixteen countries present but then lists seventeen. WAAA AGM minutes, 25 Oct. 1930, report there were seventeen countries.

included the team game hazena and an inaugural tricathlon, the predecessor of the pentathlon.³⁸

The German team lost no time in making their presence felt, winning the competition by twenty-one points from Poland. England, which finished third, scored nineteen points. The WAAA concluded that the result was a 'plucky' one, but they had been expected to do better following their two-point defeat of Germany at Birmingham's Alexander Stadium in July.³⁹ The WAAA appeared to be largely responsible for a weaker than necessary team travelling to Prague. The closing date for entries had been only a week before the WAAA Championships. Although a trial to select the team for Prague had been held in July by the women's association, two

³⁸ The Times, 10 Aug. 1934, 8 Sept. 1930. Hazena, which was unknown in England, was described by The Times as 'the old game of Handball speeded up ... feet becoming the equivalent of hands as the cause of a penalizing whistle. There is no heading apparently, but a mild form of frontal tackling - a very mild Rugby tackle - and shooting at a kind of large hockey goal ... (and) some remarkably swift and adroit passing movements. Rugby as well as Association players could do more than feign a little patronising interest in Hazena as played by women athletes. The tricathlon consisted of the high jump, javelin and 100 metres. The team games of handball, and hazena also featured as championship events.

³⁹ The Times, 28 Jul. 1930, 6 Sept. 1930. The points recorded for other countries were Japan 13, Sweden 10 and Holland 9. A second meeting between Berlin and London was held in September. This match also included Tokyo and was hosted by the German Charlottenburg club. England won by a single point but it was enough for The Times to enthusiastically report that the earlier defeat had been 'avenged'. For details, refer to The Times, 14 Sept. 1930 and WAAA AGM minutes, 28 Oct. 1930. Despite England no longer occupying the premier position in women's athletics, the sixteen athletes chosen to represent their country in Prague did not disgrace themselves. There were English finalists in the 100 metres, hurdles, long jump, relay and discus, and two representatives in the finals of the high jump and 800 metres. Gladys Lunn won the only gold medal in the 800m. Details are included in The Times, 8 Sept. 1930.

athletes who should have been selected, judging by their championship performances, were omitted as their club did not send them to the July event. This was a period when women's athletics was still relatively new, and many emerging clubs had small and sometimes rather unorganised female sections. The trial race of 1930 denied emerging athletes the opportunity to compete in Prague. As we have seen, poor organisation was an accusation levelled at the association frequently after the Second World War and this would seem to be an early example of their lack of professionalism.

The Fourth Women's World Games opened on 9 August 1930 at London's White City Stadium. It was, as a result of negotiations between the FSFI and IAAF, the last of this series of events and was not a particularly successful finale. The programme lasted three days, and involved a full athletics programme plus the team games of basketball and hazena. However, public interest failed to materialise. The crowd was estimated at between four and five thousand people. This was very disappointing for a meeting that was considered to have 'achieved wonders in the face of many obvious difficulties, and became to women what an Olympiad is to men'.⁴⁰ The size of the crowd should not be seen solely as an indication of the declining appeal of the Women's World Games, although it was significantly lower than the 15,000 in Prague. It could have been a reflection of athletic 'fatigue', because the Women's World Games were held in the same stadium and directly after the Empire Games.

Although thirty countries were affiliated to the FSFI by 1934, only nineteen actually competed in Women's World Games. In addition to England, the countries that participated from Europe were Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, Italy, Yugoslavia, Latvia, Palestine, Poland and Sweden. As well as Japan and Canada, there were teams from Rhodesia, South Africa and America. The latter had not competed since the inaugural Women's Olympiad of

⁴⁰ The Times, 10 Aug. 1934.

1922 in Paris.⁴¹ In 1934, each country was allowed to enter a maximum of twelve athletes and to have one accompanying official. The WAAA was responsible for providing accommodation, food, and entertainment for the visiting teams. The teams stayed at the Great Central Hotel in Marylebone, from the 7 August until mid-day on 13 August. Social activities were provided by the WAAA Organising Committee, including a tour to Windsor Castle and a banquet to mark the end of the Games. Most of the funds were raised by donations from supporters of women's athletics in England. Appeals were made by the WAAA to all their affiliated clubs and by the BOA in their journal during 1933.

The German women excelled again, fulfilling their nation's physical culture programme of the inter-war years. They won nine out of a possible twelve events and scored an impressive ninety five points. The Times noted 'that Germany failed to win or gain a place in only one athletic event'. Poland and England repeated their second and third places of four years earlier, with thirty three and thirty one points respectively.⁴² The German's sporting success could be traced back to 1920 when sportswomen began to emerge. In 1928, Herde Bergman, the doctor in charge of the German team at the Daily Sketch international meeting, explained that all social classes in her country were now involved in organised sports. Her own club, the Charlottenberg in Berlin, had 1,200 female members in 1928, and there were a reported sixty clubs in Berlin alone catering for women. It was estimated that there were 100,000 sportswomen in Germany. This included 25,000 members of the Working People's Sports Federation. With Hitler coming to power in 1933, sport became increasingly integrated into the state. By 1934, the political situation had led to better organisation of German sportsclubs, systematic training, and far more women involved in sports than in England. It was hardly surprising that Germany's

⁴¹ 'FSFI and Women's World Games Publication, Official Report Prior to the Fourth Women's World Games.' Undated but contained in WAAA files, 1934.

⁴² The Times, 13 Aug. 1934.

female athletes should have led the world during the period prior to the Second World War.⁴³

Sport and Play provided further positive coverage for the London Women's World Games. Its correspondent describing the level of competition as 'in many ways remarkable', especially from those who had been disadvantaged by competing in the Empire Games so shortly before. Perhaps most significantly, it was noted that

Fraulein Krauss, the German girl who won the 100 and 200 metre races, can run faster than many men who week by week perform in our open handicaps.⁴⁴

In spite of Germany's strength, the English team performed creditably. International competition stimulated athletes to perform to a high standard, and four British records were broken in addition to four world records. The world and national records achieved in London, indicated that performances in women's athletics continued to improve during the 1930s and, as we have seen, it was recognised for the first time that elite women performers could beat average male athletes. However, the fact that more quality competition was now available was not the only reason for improved performances. A greater percentage of female athletes were training regularly and receiving coaching advice from trainers based at their local clubs.

The History of the Struggle to Gain Women's Events in the Olympic Games

Despite the success of the FSFI, Madame Milliat still felt that it was a necessary and positive development for women to compete in the modern Olympic Games. An appeal for female representation in track and field had been made before

⁴³ 'German Girl's Athletic Progress', Daily Sketch, 17 Aug. 1928.

⁴⁴ 'Women's World Games. A German Triumph', The Times, 13 Aug. 1934.

the 1920 Olympiad and a second was sent to the IOC in 1923. The issue of equal recognition could have been the driving force behind her continued efforts but, as will be argued later in this chapter, it is doubtful if the 'success' of her repeated requests in 1928 actually increased female athletic opportunities in the long term. Mary Leigh, Webster and Pallett have all covered the long and ultimately bitter series of negotiations between the FSFI and the IAAF in detail.⁴⁵ Consequently, only a brief outline of developments will be included here. Space is limited and it was felt that it was more important to concentrate upon new material.

The first request that the IAAF should assume control of women's athletics was proposed as early as 1922, presumably because of the successful Women's Olympic Games. The IOC discussed women's participation in the Olympics in 1923, but felt while it was inevitable that 'girls' would wish for sporting participation, that it was the responsibility of governing bodies to limit them to activities 'most suited to their sex'. Predictably they rejected the FSFI's appeal for women's athletics to be included in the 1924 Olympics, and accused the federation of abusing the 'Olympic' name and image. In 1924 the IAAF agreed to pass on requests by the FSFI to the Olympic Committee, but promptly voted against recommending women's events.⁴⁶

By 1926, relations had improved sufficiently to allow the IAAF and FSFI to negotiate with each other. It was agreed that the IAAF would propose to the IOC that five events should be included in the 1928 Amsterdam Games. These were the 100 and 800 metres, and 4 x 100 metres relay on the track, and the high jump and discus in the field. The FSFI retained its position of controlling women's athletics, but now recognised the IAAF's technical rules. Madame Milliat also agreed to change the name of the Women's Olympics, following the IOC's assertion that only they had the

⁴⁵ Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation in Summer Olympic Games'. Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women, and G. Pallett, Women's Athletics (Dulwich 1955).

⁴⁶ The Times, 23 Apr. 1923. See also Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', pp. 180-182 and Webster, Athletics of To-Day, pp. 102-103.

right to use the title. The agreement reached between the representatives of the IAAF and FSFI was not welcomed by all delegates from either body. Some IAAF members felt the IAAF should assume control of women's athletics immediately, while others argued that the five women's events should be included in the 1928 Olympic Games as an *experiment*.⁴⁷ Several delegates felt women's biological characteristics meant they had no place in athletics at all, never mind an Olympiad. The British delegate offered yet another argument against participation. He pointed out that the English WAAA did not agree with the experiment of five events, and did not want the men's federation, either at a national or international level, to represent them. Nevertheless, in 1926 it was agreed by the FSFI to support the inclusion of five disciplines at the 1928 Olympiad. The WAAA was the only federation that declined to support the proposal, a decision that had been agreed with the clubs who affiliated to them. With only five events open to women, the English position was that women's athletic future was better served by the women's own championships, under the auspices of the FSFI.⁴⁸

After the Amsterdam Olympics of 1928, the FSFI faced an even harder battle if it was to succeed in gaining a larger programme for women. Several newspapers claimed that the female competitors suffered too much distress after the 800 metres, and the subsequent outcry caused the event to be banned.⁴⁹ The IAAF discussed the future of women's athletics, and although the WAAA vigorously supported the

⁴⁷ France, Holland, Norway, Greece, Belgium, Austria, Poland, South Africa, Switzerland, the USA and Germany agreed to an experiment. Such an expression of course allowed them to change their minds after Amsterdam. The support of Germany, which was the strongest nation in women's athletics during the inter-war years, would appear to have been crucial in gaining the necessary support to pass the proposal.

⁴⁸ The FSFI International Committee held a further meeting on 8 Jan. 1928. It was decided that after 1928 the women's federation should ask for ten events in an Olympiad.

⁴⁹ This is looked at in detail later in this chapter.

inclusion of more women's events, many delegates were unhappy about their participation at all.⁵⁰ The delegates were all male, usually older men who had not been brought up to accept women's physicality as being either 'natural' or desirable. Eventually the IAAF voted to retain women's events in the Olympic Games by sixteen to six, but the full programme events requested by the FSFI was rejected by fourteen votes to eight. Only six events were agreed for the 1932 Los Angeles Games. While the 800 metres was omitted, the 80 metre hurdles and the javelin were added.⁵¹

Despite this decision, the future of women's participation within the Olympic Games was far from secure. Throughout the inter-war years, members of the IOC expressed concern about the increasing size of the Games. The suggestion of reducing the Olympic programme was discussed at the IOC meeting, held at Lausanne. It is clear that the issue had become another way of attacking female involvement in track and field. The British Olympic chairman, Lord Rochdale, reported to the British Olympic Association (BOA) that four ways of reducing the programme had been referred to the IOC Executive Committee. Included in these was 'Suppression of all women's events (The sports concerned are athletics, fencing, gymnastics and swimming.)' A sub-committee was subsequently established, and at the IOC Berlin Congress on 25 May, the motion of limiting female participation was accepted. It would appear that the male delegates could not accept any other solution to the problem of reducing the size of the Games.⁵²

The issue was not, however, that straightforward. The IAAF Congress, which had preceded the IOC Berlin Congress, had included a committee on women's sport, chaired by Madame Milliat. This had given its support to female participation in

⁵⁰ 'IAAF Meeting on Olympic Games for Women', 8 Aug. 1928.

⁵¹ The Times, 8 Aug. 1928.

⁵² British Olympic Journal, Jun. 1929, Vol. 2, No 1, p. 3. See also British Olympic Journal, Sept. 1930, Vol. 2, No. 4. Latour had initially requested the duration of the Olympic Games should be fourteen or fifteen days. The vote to retain four athletes per event was passed by 17:4.

future Olympic Games. The Times reported that the IAAF was unhappy with the IOC resolution and that it supported the motion of their own committee on women's sport. In an attempt to force the IOC to reconsider, the IAAF announced that they had unanimously agreed that there would not be any men's athletics at the 1932 Olympics if women were restricted to gymnastics, swimming, lawn-tennis and skating.⁵³ The British delegates, E. Percy Low and Evan A. Hunter, together with Paul Rousseau of France, urged the committee to vote on whether women 'should be admitted to the Games' at all, but this was rejected. Athletics was subsequently accepted by seventeen votes to nine, with one abstention.⁵⁴

In general, the promises previously made by the IAAF to the FSFI had not been fulfilled. Whereas at the 1936 congress they had agreed to accept all records recognised by the FSFI, in practice only a percentage were. In addition, as already pointed out, the 1936 track programme was not expanded. This led Madame Milliat to attempt to stage a fifth Women's World Games after all, albeit as part of the European Championships. The IAAF, not surprisingly, refused to recognise the Women's World Games. They could hardly afford to. Opposition to the participation of women in the European Championships, first held for men in Torino in 1934, had been based on the argument that women should not face a major games every two years. The last thing the IAAF wanted was a resumption of the women's meeting,

⁵³ 'Women and the Olympic Games', The Times, 22 May 1930. Latour's proposal is quoted in the minutes of the Olympic Congress, Berlin, 1930, p. 25. See also 'Women to Remain in the Olympic Games', New York Times, Section XI, 25 May 1930, p. 9. This is cited in Leigh, The Evolution of Women's Participation, pp. 186-187.

⁵⁴ More detail can be found in minutes of the Olympic Congress, Berlin, 1930, p. 25. Attention is also drawn to the article, 'The Berlin Congress. Joint Report of the Delegates Representing The Olympic Associations of Great Britain, New Zealand and South Africa', British Olympic Journal, Vol. 2, No. 4, pp. 67-69.

especially if it was hijacking the games supposed to replace them. One consolation was that the European Championships programme included the 200 metres, long jump and shot-putt, none of which had been part of the Olympics yet.

The IOC's decision to allow women's athletics into the Olympic Games had initially been hailed by many as a success. However, the paltry five events that were introduced were a step backwards, rather than a progressive step forwards. One must question Madame Milliat's determination to gain women entry into this event, which appeared to follow a policy of 'at all costs'. Minutes from the FSFI reveal discontent among affiliated countries about the decision, and there was certainly debate about whether or not to agree to such conditions. By assimilating into the men's federations and participating in their championships, the women's governing bodies lost the ability to bargain with the IAAF, and subsequently could no longer influence their sport's development. The final demise of the FSFI, however, was brought about by a German proposal that the women's federation should be absorbed into the IAAF. Although the WAAA minutes are not specific, they do include the statement that 'considerable discussion arose, and it was finally agreed that England would only agree if a full programme of events was granted, and there was adequate representation on the Olympic Council.' They were also keen to ensure that women judges would be allowed to officiate at future competitions. Acting on advice from the English WAAA, Mrs Cornell proposed that

the FSFI will agree to give up the Women's World Games when a complete programme for women's athletics is included in the Olympic games, and under the condition to have a direct representative on the IOC. The FSFI note that the IOC is more and more reluctant to have women take part in the Olympic Games in every kind of sport. Under such circumstances the FSFI think that we must take up again the idea

of organising a women's Olympic Games including every kind of sport.⁵⁵

The FSFI members carried this motion unanimously. Their distrust of the international federations is clear, as is the underlying anger at the recent treatment of sportswomen in general by the highly conservative IOC. The struggle to enable women to take their full place in the male-dominated world of sport was far from over, as these delegates realised. In such an atmosphere of suspicion, it must have appeared unlikely that the FSFI would ever assimilate into the IAAF, let alone that it would take such an action a mere two years after this congress rejected the German proposal.

The German suggestions were discussed at the XII Congress of the IAAF, which met on the 28 and 29 of August 1934. Not surprisingly, the IAAF agreed with Germany's proposals and also demanded that members of the IAAF should leave the FSFI.⁵⁶ The women's association had no alternative but to continue discussions with the IAAF. In 1934 it was agreed that a joint FSFI - IAAF committee should be formed to discuss a way forward. This was clearly necessary after the IOC only narrowly voted to retain women's athletics in 1935 by two votes. In 1936, the joint committee recommended nine events for women at the next Olympic Games, with the 200 metres, long jump and shot-putt to be added. When the XIII Congress of the IAAF met on 11 August, it was announced that the FSFI had agreed to hand over the control of women's athletics to the IAAF, on condition that the women's world records, already ratified by the FSFI, were recognised by the IAAF.

Their second stipulation was that more events were included in the Olympic programme for female athletes. The IAAF agreed to accept the records already endorsed, and to recommend that the 100 metres, 200 metres, 4 x 100 metres relay

⁵⁵ Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', p. 193.

⁵⁶ Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 48.

and 80 metre hurdles should become Olympic events for women. In the field, they agreed to support the high jump, long jump, discus, javelin and shot putt. This was a full programme for women with the exception of the 800 metres. With the influence of the IAAF, the women's associations could be optimistic that their requisites would be fulfilled. However, the IAAF in what was undoubtedly an attempt to relieve the FSFI of any position of power in women's athletics, demanded in return that the Fifth Women's World Games, scheduled for Paris in 1938, should be cancelled. Such an event, they argued, was no longer necessary if the Olympic Games was to include a greater number of women's events.

The decision by the IAAF and the FSFI to accept the joint committee's recommendations effectively ended any bargaining power that the women's federation had left. The Women's World Games in 1934 was therefore the last of the pioneering and highly successful women's championships. In light of the continued marginalisation of female competitors in subsequent major internationals, this was undoubtedly a decision that severely hindered the development of female distance running. The demise of the Women's World Games marked the end of an era where women were in control of their own sport. While a formal dissolution was never announced, no further activity by the FSFI was recorded. After all her efforts spanning fifteen years, which were characterised by constant struggle and opposition, the only mark of gratitude Madame Milliat received was a letter which included a thank-you for her 'good work'. She surely deserved better, as did her organisation that was abruptly excluded from the international scene.

In retrospect, agreeing to participate in the 1928 Olympic Games was probably a mistake by the FSFI. The time to hold out for better treatment had been in 1926, when the FSFI remained in control of the one competitive opportunity for their members. The World Games had been a successful and well-supported event that provided the FSFI with their only bargaining vehicle. Once women began to compete in the Olympic Games, the federation's position was significantly weakened.

Ultimately, the determination of the IAAF to support women's events in the Olympic Games destroyed the control that the women had over their destiny in athletics.

In trying to understand why the decision was taken, one needs to take into account the appeal of the Olympic Games. In recent years the Olympics has stimulated interest throughout the world, and while they were not so popular in the twenties, they were still the largest sporting spectacle. By agreeing to the IAAF's demands, and competing in the five events, the leaders of the FSFI may have felt they were securing a place for women's athletics on the world stage. They could not foretell the disapproving response to the Amsterdam 800 metres, nor the subsequent wave of opposition that the race created. Therefore, they probably concluded that interest and support would increase with a larger audience. It is easy to criticise the FSFI for their naiveté in expecting their demands to be met, but unfortunately, they did not have the power of hindsight that one has now. Despite its negative aspects, it cannot be denied that women's athletics was launched onto the world stage at Amsterdam.

The British Olympic Association, despite voting for a Canadian proposal to omit women after Amsterdam, does not appear to have been significantly opposed to female involvement in 1928. There is no mention in their journal that the BOA was opposed to women's participation, nor that they would fail to support a female team. Even after the subsequent controversy of the Games, the BOA declined to criticise women's inclusion. It was pointed out in the BOA Official Report of the 1928 Games, that as women were already competing in swimming and gymnastics, it would be illogical to prevent them from participating in athletics.⁵⁷

Reports published in contemporary newspapers provide more detail about why the WAAA did not to send a team to Amsterdam. The Daily Sketch announced that the 'Girl Athletes (were) To Boycott Amsterdam' because in the view of the

⁵⁷ British Olympic Association Official Report, 1928, p. 144.

WAAA there were not enough events. The secretary, Miss Vera Palmer, was quoted as saying that

Unless we can participate in many more events ... we prefer to wait for our Olympiad, which will take place in two years in Czecho-Slovakia. That will be an added advantage, since the money saved will be a great help to us in 1930.⁵⁸

Although this article indicated the financial concerns of the women's association, it should be noted that in this the WAAA was not any different from many other sporting organisations. The Chicago Tribune published an article in December 1927 in which it stated that 'Britain needs Olympic funds'. It described the poor financial state of Britain's sport and the lack of government funding. This contrasted with many other countries including France, Italy and Germany. The chairman of the BOA was quoted as saying that

Great Britain, having won the war and having paid the debts resulting from it, is at the great disadvantage of being the only nation which cannot afford state contributions towards any national or international sport.

Consequently, a public subscription was launched to fund the British teams in 1928. As we have seen, the BOA had intended to support both the men's and women's teams in Amsterdam, and they would have provided most of the funds required. While each national governing body was responsible for all pre-Olympic training and

⁵⁸ 23 Jan. 1928.

competition, the BOA was 'responsible for all expenses of transport by train and boat, housing, and feeding during the Games, and equipment'.⁵⁹

Financial considerations were not the primary reason why Britain was not represented by a women's team in 1928. As we have seen, the decision taken by the WAAA was despite an offer by the BOA to cover their expenses. Nevertheless, the women were in a different position to the men's team. In two years time, they would have to appeal to the public again to try to raise funds for the women's team that would compete in Prague. The WAAA argued that securing time off work was a problem for their athletes, and they themselves would prefer to wait for the full programme in Prague. Finally, the association commented that as

the men will find some difficulty in raising sufficient money for the trip ... it would be not be quite fair for us to appeal to the public twice in two years. Our girls are, with about two exceptions, working girls, and when they enter for these games it usually means that they give up their summer holidays in order to compete. They are willing to do this, but their sacrifices are not enough to make this trip possible.⁶⁰

Responses to the Women's 800 Metres at the Amsterdam Olympic Games

As has already been indicated, the official view of the IOC after this event was that the 800 metres was not suitable for women. This conclusion was also advocated in both the New York and London editions of The Times. It was claimed that all the competitors were distressed and collapsed after the race.⁶¹ For those struggling to achieve more support for women's athletics, the image of female

⁵⁹ Chicago Tribune, Tribune Press Service, 22 Dec. 1927.

⁶⁰ Bath and Wilts Chronicle, 25 Jan. 1928.

⁶¹ Attention is drawn to the fact that The Times was wrong to assert that all competitors collapsed.

Evidence is subsequently presented in this thesis, which refutes the claim.

involvement was significantly damaged. Although it is not possible to say that opposition would have decreased if the race had not been so controversial, the event was used by critics to ban the 800 metres from the Olympic Games until 1960, and justify arguments to exclude *all* women's competition from the Games. Significantly, the BOA criticised what it called the 'sensationalised' accounts published in newspapers following the 800 metre race. The New York Times conveniently forgot that Frau Radke of Germany had set a new world record in the final. The fact that she had obviously trained for the event, and did not display any distress, was ignored during the ensuing criticism.⁶²

The Times, while stopping short of outright condemnation, did question the advisability of repeating such an event for women. It concluded that

the final of the 800m for girls, rather (left) the impression that such things should not be. Perhaps in the course of time a race of highly trained girl athletes will arise who will not reveal or feel more distress than the male champions ... In the meantime the progress of beating world records, such as was achieved by a German girl, and very nearly by K. Hitomi of Japan this afternoon, would appear not to be without its dangers. The half-dozen prostrate and obviously distressed forms lying about on the grass at the side of the track after the race, may not warrant a complete condemnation of the girl athletic championships, but it certainly suggests unpleasant possibilities.⁶³

The fact that women had been competing over this distance for some years had plainly been forgotten. Both the Women's Olympiad of 1922 and the 1926 Second International Ladies' Games incorporated the longer distance of 1,000 metres without

⁶² 'Americans Beaten in Four Olympic Tests', 3 Aug. 1928.

⁶³ 'The Olympic Games', 3 Aug. 1928.

any cause for alarm. Domestic races in England were held over 800 metres under the auspices of the WAAA, and the women's internationals of 1924 and 1925 both included 800 metres, again without any reports of distress.

In fact, evidence that women, if correctly trained, could compete over 800 metres had been provided in the qualifying heats of the 1928 Olympics themselves. However, this was not taken into consideration by most of the newspaper reporters or the IOC. The Daily Telegraph had commented that the

women turned out to run in the heat of their 800m, and as in the shorter distances, they left us amazed by their speed of foot and stamina. Only one, a little Italian girl, fell by the wayside. The others made light of what even to menfolk is a punishing race - Miss Hitomi, the Japanese young lady and Miss Rosenfeld (Canada) stood out as wonder women.⁶⁴

Memories were short, however, and the descriptions given of the 'distress' and 'disgust' that the 800 metre final produced were the image that most people remembered and associated with women's distance running. The Times published a letter from the honorary secretary of the Joint Committee on Physical Education for Girl's Schools. The Amsterdam 800 metres was referred to in order to denounce the progress made by women in all areas of sport. The argument popular in the nineteenth century, that women had limited nervous energy and therefore must restrict their physical ability, was reiterated in order to justify a restriction of their sporting opportunities, and is worth quoting at length:

Women who take part in the Olympic Games contests are reduced to the pitiful condition shown by photographs in this mornings papers in

⁶⁴ 3 Aug. 1926.

an effort to prove that women are able to take part, as men do, in feats of physical prowess. Women have an immense fund of nervous force which enables them to keep on, literally till they drop ...

It is amazing that there are so many women even in these modern days who think they glorify their sex by asserting they are as good as men. In many ways they are better - but quite different ... at maturity they are, or should be, completely different - one destined for one purpose, one for another ...

One is frequently humiliated, on behalf of one's sex, by seeing it emblazoned in the newspaper that a woman has accomplished something that men have been doing as a matter of course for years ... they are emphasizing the difference between the sexes when they succeed in doing something by terrific overstrain what men do easily ... women are utterly different from men, in some ways much finer and better, in others weaker and worse.⁶⁵

In light of the comments already discussed, the BOA Official Report of the Amsterdam Olympiad makes interesting reading. It refuted the press reports, and argued that the decision to exclude further races was 'somewhat absurd', as the FSFI had allowed races up to the 1,000 metres. It noted that there was no evidence of distress after the 800 metres and it was untrue to say that all the competitors 'collapsed'. The report concluded that while

it was perfectly true to say that two or three of the competitors (one of whom I know, had never run the distance before) showed signs of mild

⁶⁵ The Times, 6 Aug. 1928.

discomfort, ... this was more psychological than physical and entirely to be accounted for by the natural disappointment at being beaten. It is certainly open to argument that the high tension of short distance running is more likely to be harmful to women than long-distance events, for it is generally agreed that a woman's physical make-up is more suited to endurance than speed.⁶⁶

The IOC's own Dr Messerli also agreed with this version of events. He was an official at the Amsterdam Games, and was at the trackside while the 800 metres was in progress. Messerli wrote that there was an

amusing little incident (which) occurred at the finals of the 800m flat, when reaching the winning post, two Canadians and one Japanese competitor collapsed on the lawn, the public and the journalists believed them to be in a state of exhaustion. I was judging this particular event and on the spot at the time, I can therefore certify that there was nothing wrong with them, they burst into tears thus betraying their disappointment at having lost the race, a very feminine trait!⁶⁷

Harold Abrahams also favoured this interpretation. He was quoted in the Daily Sketch as saying that all the women, if they collapsed at all, soon recovered. As for crying, this 'was not due to the physical exertion but to the simply psychological disappointment of being beaten.' One of the Canadian girls who collapsed at Amsterdam, Miss Fanny Rosenfeld, was reported to be 'quite amused' about the fuss. She supported Abraham's version of events, saying that both she, and the other

⁶⁶ p. 146.

⁶⁷ Cited in Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation', p. 333.

Canadian Miss Thompson, were fully recovered ten minutes after the event. Rosenfeld argued that she had not trained for the event, and merely ran it 'to accompany' Miss Thompson. It was true that her colleague did collapse at the finish, but this was 'not from exhaustion ... (but) out of disappointment at not winning.'⁶⁸

The banning of the 800 metres undoubtedly curtailed its progression, for while it could be run in domestically arranged meetings there was no opportunity to compete at major games following the demise of the FSFI World Games in 1934. Small international matches, such as those held between England and France, retained the 800 metres in their programme, but this would not have provided the same level of competition that major championships did. Many talented women were denied a chance to represent their country and compete on a world stage. The English athlete Gladys Lunn was restricted to competing in her second string event the javelin, in order to participate in the 1938 Empire Games.

Not everyone, however, was disappointed by the IOC decision. There remained a powerful body of opinion opposed to women's distance running, as well as their involvement in events such as the long jump and throwing events. The United States of America, who had been vehemently against longer races prior to the 1928 Games, was unsurprisingly pleased that their position had been adopted by the international governing bodies. The American Committee Report on the Olympic Games made it plain that they felt sanity had returned to the sporting arena.⁶⁹ It was a different story in England, where opinions expressed in some of the newspapers did not support the ban. The Daily Sketch was scathing about the decision to omit the distance in future Olympics. Reports published in this newspaper emphasised that men often suffered after hard competition, and declared that hysteria about the harm sport could do to women was unnecessary. In contrast to opinions expressed in

⁶⁸ 9 Aug. 1928 and 12 Aug. 1928.

⁶⁹ (New York 1928), p. 154.

America by Dr. Rogers⁷⁰ and the international athletic associations, the Daily Sketch argued that women were no different from male athletes. The report is worth quoting at length:

In what looks like an attempt to relieve the tedium of the Silly Season, sensational statements are being made regarding the allegedly disastrous effects of the Amsterdam Olympiad upon women competitors.

“Their participation in track and field events for the first time,” we are informed, “is deplorable in many quarters.”

This is not difficult to believe, since almost every effort that women and girls have made to assert their right to rational enjoyment and the development of their athletic prowess has been deplored in some quarters. But when old-fashioned prejudice is camouflaged as deep concern for the physical well being of women athletes it is time to protest.

If a woman runner at Amsterdam gives up, as many a man has done, we are told that she had “dropped out with a pathetic gesture of despair.” A comparison of photographs however is more illuminating. They reveal that men and women taking part in strenuous athletic contests show exactly the same facial expressions.

That the girls who finished in the 800m flat race were temporarily exhausted is no more an argument against women taking part in such

⁷⁰ These have already been discussed, see ‘Olympics For Girls?’, particularly pp. 190-191.

contests than the fact that crews are usually “done up” at the finish constitutes a reason for abolishing the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race.⁷¹

The 800 metres was included in the women’s international of 1928, sponsored by the Daily Sketch. The paper was careful to emphasise that no problems were experienced by any of the athletes. The competitors were described as all completing the race ‘without distress ... tears ... hysterics – (or) histrionics!’. Harold Abrahams, writing for the same paper, also emphasised this, commenting that there were ‘no weeping damsels to comfort...’. The meeting was summed up in typically positive fashion, and the coverage provided by the Daily Sketch was crucial in providing support for women athletics. Lord Desborough, who was presenting prizes, concluded that he ‘saw nothing but smiling faces among the competitors and spectators alike.’⁷²

English Women's Involvement in the 1932 and 1936 Olympic Games.

Despite their unhappiness over the number of events, English women competed for the first time in the Olympic Games at Los Angeles in 1932. Unfortunately for those in contention, the number of athletes was restricted due to the cost of travelling. The WAAA decided not to send either a chaperone or masseuse, so that athletes could fill all the five places allocated by the BOA to the women’s team. The BOA had never been particularly well financed and this would have been exacerbated by the economic depression experienced during the thirties. A significant proportion of Olympic funds was raised through personal donations, and it is likely that the amount raised would have been affected by the economic situation. The problem of travelling so far was not restricted to Great Britain, or indeed to the

⁷¹ 4 Aug. 1924.

⁷² 'Women Athletes Smash World Records', 15 Aug. 1928 and H. Abrahams, 'Fit At The Finish', 15 Aug. 1928.

women's teams. Consequently, the number of athletes present at the Games was smaller than at Amsterdam. For the women's competition, only eight countries sent female teams. The largest of these, for obvious reasons, was the USA with seventeen athletes. Canada and Japan were represented by nine women, Holland by six, Germany and Britain by five, Poland by three and South Africa by a single athlete.⁷³

Contemporary reporting of the first women's athletics team to represent Great Britain at these Olympic Games was not particularly impressive. The team's results were merely listed at the end of reports describing the men's events. The WAAA committee minutes contain a brief report prepared by their own Miss Johnson, who had travelled to Los Angeles at her private expense. According to Johnson, the women's accommodation was 'too far from the men thus leaving them more or less stranded'. Nevertheless, despite this criticism she was able to inform the association that each girl performed 'very well'. However, a subsequent report presented at the annual general meeting of 1932 qualifies this by commenting that the British women 'had to be content with minor honours (despite which) they performed creditably'.⁷⁴

George Pallett has provided more information, leaving the reader in no doubt that America's 'Babe' Didrikson was the star of the Games. Didrikson was an employee of the Employers' Casualty Company of Dallas (Texas), and had initially risen to fame at the USA women's athletic championships, which had also served as the Olympic trial. As the only member of her team, she had participated in eight out of the available ten events, and was reported to have been continually competing for two and a half hours. She won five events and was equal first in a sixth. Her performances ensured that she was remembered as the first female track and field star:

⁷³ Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 47.

⁷⁴ Please refer to the minutes, undated, but in both the 1932 file and WAAA AGM minutes, 1932.

in those two hours or so, “The Babe” became world famous. She was the “super-athlete,” a “marvel maid,” “the wonder girl of modern sport.” Nobody took much notice of women's athletics until “The Babe” came along. Her personality helped greatly to establish it with the international sports public.⁷⁵

Didrikson's successes continued at Los Angeles, where she broke two world records in the 80 metre hurdles and javelin. She dominated the former, setting new figures in both her qualifying heat and the final. A third victory and another record were almost achieved in the high jump, when Didrikson jumped five feet 1/4 inches (1.53 metres), and improved the previous best held from 1929 by the Dutch athlete Carolina Gisolf. The contemporary rules interpreted her jumping style as ‘diving’ over the bar and consequently Didrikson was disqualified. Her compatriot, Jean Shiley, was awarded the gold with the ‘Babe’ second. Dr Willy Meisl, who had been present at the Los Angeles Olympics, felt that the officials invoked the ‘peculiar piece of rule enforcement’ in order to keep the men's programme on schedule, as much as because of Didrikson's use of a new technique. He recalled that a

tedious tie threatened to develop, while the stadium feverishly waited for the 4x400m relay final. The bar was lowered again and both girls cleared it. Then, suddenly one of the judges decided that Didrikson had “dived” in her jump. “The Babe” had been using the Western Roll - rare for a man at the time and unique for a woman ... She was disqualified ... but the sublime was added to the ridiculous when she was allowed to retain second place and share the world record.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ W. Meisl, ‘The Babe’, World Sports, Nov. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 35.

⁷⁶ World Sports, Nov. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 35

The WAAA was better prepared for the 1936 Games. With the forthcoming Berlin Olympics in mind, they organised a women's international at Blackpool on 9 June 1936. This match was part of the WAAA diamond jubilee celebrations. In addition to the English team, athletes from Sweden, Holland, France and Scotland competed. Although it was an expensive event for the WAAA, it provided an essential competitive opportunity for the athletes. The English team boosted its confidence by winning all of the flat track events plus the jumps. British records were also recorded in the 60 metres and high jump. The latter was achieved by Dorothy Odam, who continued to compete at an elite level after the war, under her married name of Tyler. This record, in her first international match, marked the beginning of a highly successful international career.⁷⁷ The team for the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games was selected after the WAAA Championships, on 18 July. Earlier in the season, about forty eight promising female athletes had been named as 'Olympic possibles'. As such, they had been offered extra coaching by the national and area coaches, many of whom were men. If they were fortunate enough to belong to a London club, season tickets were issued to enable them to use local cinder tracks. The latter was not, however, due to any planning by the British Olympic Association, but to the personal generosity of the honourable Lady Bailey DBE, who was later to become president of the WAAA.

The political situation of 1936 inevitably influenced the Olympic Games of that year. The extent to which they were used by the Nazi regime has been well documented, and will not be discussed in detail here. Evidence of further progress in

⁷⁷ WAAA AGM minutes, 28 Nov. 1936. See also The Times, 10 Jun. 1936. The Blackpool Corporation provided financial and administration help. They were aided by the NCWAAA, in particular Mrs Ruth Taylor. Results of the match were England 54, Sweden 31.5, Holland 17.5, Scotland 8 and France 8. More information on Dorothy Odam can be found in the following chapter.

women's athletics was evident at the Berlin Olympiad. A record 328 women, representing twenty six countries competed in the various women's events. In spite of the fact that the number of track and field events remained at six, 105 women, drawn from twenty countries were entered in this sport. This compared with 735 men in the male athletic disciplines. Eleven athletes were selected for the British women's athletics team, which was the third largest behind Germany's team of seventeen and America's sixteen. Along with their team manager Mrs Muriel Cornell, chaperone Mrs C. Palmer and masseuse Mrs Ruth Taylor, the team travelled by boat via Ostend. The separate nature of the men's and women's athletic administration at this time was emphasized by the fact that the teams did not travel together. The men took what was surprisingly described as the more direct route, of Liverpool to Berlin.⁷⁸

Financial considerations were undoubtedly behind the last-minute arrival of the women's team in Germany, which left little time for preparation. The athletes had to do their best in difficult circumstances, but in this period international athletes had never experienced anything else:

I trained hard before we went ... But you see it wasn't easy for you, the men went out before we did so they got acclimatised, but the women's association couldn't afford to send us over until just a few days before the events, and then ... we went by sea and train, and no concessions to our poor legs or anything. In fact, there was no sleeper on the train.⁷⁹

Once in Berlin, both training and living arrangements were of a high standard. The men's and women's teams were housed separately, as was usual at this time, and therefore did not mix to the same extent as in the student games. The women were accommodated near to the training and competition arenas, staying at the Frederick Friessen Haus. For once, they were provided with more conveniently situated

⁷⁸ British Olympic Association Official Report, 1936, p. 80.

⁷⁹ Interview with Audrey Court (née Brown), 29 Jun. 1993.

accommodation than the men's teams. The two teams did manage to meet at the training track, which the men travelled to by bus. There they were able to 'talk and gossip'. German guides and chaperones, however, accompanied the female athletes at all times. This was partly due, according to Audrey Court, to the 'state of affairs in Berlin'. She recalled that

when we got there we trained hard, we used to go to the practice track ... because it was easy for us. It was much easier for us than the men... because ... they had to come from the (athletes) village, whereas we just walked, under escort, out of the gates onto the training track and ... from the training track you went by tunnel on to the main track.⁸⁰

Within the Haus, where the British women were staying, high-school girls acted as waitresses. Over a hundred guides, who had been allocated to the different teams, attended to any problems that might have arisen. The German State tried hard to impress its visitors and a medical service was provided for the athletes. This was staffed by some of the country's leading surgeons. The building itself was new for the Games, and was situated within its own grounds ready to become a centre for physical culture after the Olympics. Entertainment was also arranged, including sightseeing trips and receptions.

An enthusiastic and what was described as a 'simply colossal' crowd of 110,000 was present for the Games. This was by far the largest crowd ever brought together to witness athletics, and must have contributed to an electric atmosphere. The Germans, with their strongly built and well-trained team, dominated the field events, which consisted of the high jump, javelin, and discus. Apart from Odam's silver medal, British weakness in these disciplines was evident. There was no representative at all in the discus, while Miss Connal placed twelfth in the javelin.

⁸⁰ Interview with Audrey Court.

German women won both events, Miss Mauermeyer having set six world records in the discus before the Games. The report that Muriel Cornell submitted to the WAAA after the Games was rather misleading, and suggested that the team did better than they actually did in terms of medals won. Cornell notes that Britain secured five silvers and 'did considerably better than any other British women's team.' The total number of five medals, however, included not only Odam's individual medal but the four gained by the relay team!⁸¹

After the Olympic Games, several additional competitions were arranged between some of the nations present in Berlin. The British team joined eight other teams at Wuppertal, making it the largest international meeting that they had participated in, apart from the Women's World Games. The teams were all guests of the German authorities, and their financial support was necessary if the British contingent was to remain in Germany. It did mean, however, that they were further subjected to attempts by their hosts to impress them with the quality of German life. The WAAA annual general meeting of 1936 merely recorded that 'everything was done to encourage friendship between Germany and England'. Audrey Court, however, provided more detail, and remembered being taken to a dairy to see the milk provision for local people and visiting local families with a German 'companion'. She was offered coffee and cake while the housewife told them what a high standard of living she had under the present regime.⁸²

The Growth of Non-Olympic Competition, 1933-1939

The collapse of the FSFI in 1936 did not affect women's international competition in the second half of the 1930s. Apart from the major championships, the

⁸¹ British Olympic Association Official Report, 1936, p. 95 and WAAA AGM minutes, 28 Nov. 1936.

⁸² Interview.

individual national associations were responsible for the smaller matches, and the WAAA selected teams to travel abroad right up to outbreak of the war in 1939. Although there were far fewer international matches than for athletes in the 1990s, developments in transport meant that competition had grown considerably. Teams could now fly to international meetings, which enabled more European matches to be organised during the 1930s. Athletes and officials could leave their own country on Friday, compete on the Saturday, and be home again by Sunday. This alleviated the problem of securing time off work and the loss of wages.

Both 1933 and 1935 were quiet years, with the University World Games the largest meeting. The FSFI had never been responsible for female student championships, so no interruption to the games resulted from the negotiations between that governing body and the IAAF. The first time that women students were included in a British Universities team was at the International University Games at Turin in 1933. Birmingham's Miss Cox won the javelin and became Britain's first female World Student Athletic Champion. Regular representative matches followed the involvement of women at these games.⁸³

Student championships were based on the Olympic model of having several sports included in the timetable. The standard of competition did not always match the high performances at other major games, and the attention it received in the athletic and general press was far less, particularly in the case of the women. Financial support for the team was also a problem, and in the case of Turin, selection was limited to those who could afford to make the trip. Consequently, it was not the strongest team possible that travelled. By the 1935 championships in Budapest, things had improved sufficiently to allow the largest British team to be selected, but only four of the athletes were women. According to Audrey Court, the student matches had a far friendlier atmosphere than either the European Championships or Olympic Games. The male and female team members were housed together and shared

⁸³ R. Kerslake, 'University Sport', *World Sports*, Mar. 1939, Vol. 6, No. 5 pp. 163-164.

training facilities. In a direct contrast between the Paris University Games of 1937 and the previous year's Olympics, she noted that Paris was a much more relaxed affair, where 'the men and women mingled together quite freely.'⁸⁴

Many of the smaller matches organised by the WAAA during the latter years of the thirties were held in Germany. During the summer season of 1937, a British team competed at both Wuppertal and Krefeld, the latter also involving a Dutch team. A British men's team was also present, although the extent to which the teams remained separate was emphasised by Jack Crump. He recalled that

in addition to my team there was a team of British women athletes separately chosen and managed, we met up in the hotel at Krefeld. Our men athletes were not particularly approachable and the comments of some of the British girls on this point were pointed.

The reluctance shown by the male athletes to mix with their female counterparts may partly be explained by the differences in class backgrounds of several of the men and women. Many of the men came from privileged backgrounds, and had been educated at Oxbridge, while the majority of women worked for their living. While Crump did not suggest this as a reason himself, the issue of class should not be discounted. Relationships, however, began to improve after the competition, although it is doubtful if this was a result of the women's athletic performances. Rather, the British team's racism stimulated the men to belatedly spend time with the women's team. Crump wrote that the male athletes 'decided that it was too risky to allow our girls to be in the care of the Italian and other foreign athletes, and that it was their duty to escort and protect them from any possible advances.'⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Interview.

⁸⁵ J. Crump, Running Round The World (1966), pp. 55-56.

A third German match for the British team, this time involving a Polish team as well, was held in August in Berlin. The WAAA team manager emphasised how well she considered the teams had been looked after. They would remember their competitions in Germany fondly. There is no mention in either the Olympic Report of 1936, or in the descriptions of races in 1937, of the military build-up that was obvious throughout the area at this time. This should not be seen as evidence that the athletes were not affected by the political tensions. In addition to Audrey Court's memories, Jack Crump's recollections of the Krefeld match noted that the team 'heard and saw Hitler Youth and Storm Troopers drilling in the square outside our hotel at 4.30 in the morning, and dummy bombs on the streets advertised air-raid precaution services'.⁸⁶

There was a particularly busy month of competition during August 1937. In addition to Berlin, women's teams travelled to matches in Paris and Brussels. The growth of international meetings meant that a greater number of athletes had an opportunity to experience better competition. This, in turn helped to improve overall performances. The fact that there were enough athletes of a high enough standard to warrant these additional international matches should also be considered. The increased number of meetings was surely a reflection of the greater interest in athletics that was displayed by women in the inter-war years. The Paris match was nearly turned down by the WAAA, because of their policy not to send teams abroad if it clashed with important British events. Although they did not wish to send a 'B' team, the French persuaded them to do so in the interests of providing competition for their own athletes. The benefit of such matches was highlighted, however, when one of the English 60 metre runners equalled the British record.⁸⁷

In addition to the Olympic Games and the Women's World Games, three other major championships provided quality competition for women before the

⁸⁶ Crump, Running Round The World, p.56

⁸⁷ WAAA AGM minutes, 26 Nov. 1938 and, undated, 1939. In addition, refer to World Sports, Sept. 1937, Vol. 3, No. 5, p. 172.

Second World War. Immediately before the Women's World Games, the second British Empire Games had been held from 4-8 August at the White City. This championship had been the original idea of Mr Richard Coones of Sydney, some twenty-five years earlier, but the first was not held until 1911. The meeting was then organised as part of the 'Festival of Sport' at Crystal Palace, which was held to celebrate the coronation of King George V. They were resurrected in 1930 after the Amsterdam Olympics had stimulated interest again, and then subsequently organised every four years. Women somewhat surprisingly were always part of Coones's vision that sport had an imperial value, a fact that was approved of by The Times in 1934. Their correspondent commented that

the future of relationships of the various portions of the Empire (he declared) rests chiefly in the hands of young men and women of the Empire ... He was wise and far seeing to include the women ...⁸⁸

Women participated in the 1930 Empire Games, but only in swimming. When women's athletics was included for the first time in 1934, it provided an opportunity to compete over 800 metres. Interest in the championships was high, with a reported 50,000 spectators. Although the majority of people were undoubtedly drawn by the men's events, it would have been by far the largest home crowd before which the English women's team had ever competed. Female teams were also sent from South Africa, Scotland and Rhodesia. Britain's Elaine Hiscock won the 100 yards, beating the 1928 Olympic silver medallist Miss Strike, who represented Canada. Hiscock achieved a second victory in the 220 yards, this time in record time. The English athletes were also strong in the javelin and half-mile, with Gladys Lunn achieving an unusual double in both events.

⁸⁸ The Times, 27 Jul. 1934.

The Sydney Empire Games of 1938 was held shortly before the first women's European Championships in Vienna. Nine female athletes travelled to Australia and were accompanied by the WAAA official Mrs Rose Gillis, who acted as team manager. However, on this occasion, there was neither a chaperone nor masseuse, a decision that was again probably due to the greater travel expenses incurred. As in the Olympic Games, the men were accommodated in an athlete's village while the women were housed in hotels. They did, however, train at the same venue as the men and the two teams were entertained together. Dorothy Odam, who was the youngest member of the British team, was the most successful woman athlete for the second major games in succession. She won gold in the high jump, improving on the silver medal she had won at the Berlin Olympics.

The WAAA sent a team of twelve athletes to the inaugural women's European Championships in September. In addition, they were represented by one of their members officiating at this prestigious event. The WAAA had expressed their concern that their members would not be considered for duty at major championships once the women affiliated to the IAAF. The women's committee minutes record that the association was 'honoured' that their nominee, the NCWAAA official Mrs Ruth Taylor, had been accepted as a judge by the European Commission. The inclusion of Mrs Taylor was no doubt due to the championships being exclusively female. Very few women's officials were accepted for mixed major games, a situation that was to continue for some years after the Second World War.

By the time the European Championships was held in Vienna, the political situation in Germany was significantly more tense than it had been at the Olympics. The WAAA checked with the Foreign Office whether it would be safe for the team to compete, and were reassured that they would be 'got out quickly' if the need arose. The athletes travelled by sea and train, and were faced with the reality of military build-up, the presence of German troops and local demonstrations. As one would expect, the atmosphere at the championships was affected by the political situation, as indeed were the athletes participating. Audrey Court recalled that they

didn't mingle or talk to the athletes from the other countries at all, you really were just competing, then you got back into your bus and came back to the hotel in the centre of Vienna ... You were very conscious of the political undercurrents all the time, it was most upsetting really.⁸⁹

By 1939, most international competition had been superseded by the threat of war. There should be no doubt that the war slowed the rate at which women's athletics was progressing, both domestically and internationally. International athletics had grown dramatically since 1921, and both the number of competitions and standards of performances were continuing to rise when war broke out. In England, however, the amount of success enjoyed by both female and male athletes during the 1930s was a cause for some concern. The women's team, which had been at the forefront of athletics in the 1920s had been soundly beaten at the 1936 Olympic Games, although it was still the strongest team in the British Empire.

The general lack of facilities was frequently commented on as contributing to the decline in British standards. What was more significant for the women was that smaller numbers were involved. In the initial years of competition this was less of a problem, because all the countries involved experienced similar problems. However, when other nations began to expand their organisations, often backed by state grants, the increased amount of coaching and local facilities it provided, allowed them to improve and recruit more athletes into their programmes. Financial problems were certainly a problem for the WAAA. Invitations to compete in some international competitions during the inter-war years had to be declined because of lack of money. Although the teams had their travel and accommodation paid for by the host federation, the WAAA would be expected to organise a return match. The inability to

⁸⁹ Interview.

cover the cost of this was the most frequently given reason for turning down invitations. Some sponsorship was provided by newspapers and sometimes via personal contacts, but the association was fighting a constant battle to provide its athletes with the stimulus of foreign competition.

Despite the fact that the number of matches had clearly increased, women's athletics faced continued opposition. While female athletes were accepted to a greater extent by 1939, their place in the sporting world was still not entirely secure. The following chapter will discuss how their involvement was perceived after the war, and trace the continued expansion of international competition.

Chapter Four

INTERNATIONAL ATHLETICS AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Situation at the End of the War

The international athletic world resumed activities remarkably quickly once the Second World War ended. Undoubtedly, this was aided by the fact that athletics had not completely stopped between the years 1939 and 1945. Not surprisingly, athletics in America continued, as the country remained relatively unaffected by the hostilities until the latter part of the war. In Europe, neutral Sweden continued to organise athletic competitions. During 1944 and 1945, Anna Larsson improved the world records for both the 800 metres and 800 yards.¹ What is more surprising, however, is that several world bests were recorded during competitions held in countries that were affected by the war. Germany was keen to maintain the idea of normality and the sense of ultimate victory, at least until 1943. Competitive sport continued, and in 1942, Germany's Anneliese Steinheur improved the women's javelin world record.² In the same year, Holland's Francina Blankers-Koen equalled the Italian, Testoni's, 80 metres hurdles world record of 11.3 seconds. Blankers-Koen followed this in 1943, with records in both the high and long jumps. More records

¹ G. Pallett, Women's Athletics (Dulwich 1955), p. 59. In 1944 she ran 2 minutes 15.9 seconds in a 800 metres held at Stockholm, improving the previous world record set in the Amsterdam Olympic Games of 1928 by just under three seconds. The following year Larsson improved her record twice in the space of eleven days, running two seconds quicker. A month later, on 5 September 1945, she established her last world record, this time over the 880 yard distance. Britain's Olive Hall, who had run 2 minutes 17.4 at Birmingham in 1936, was relieved of the record when Larsson registered 2 minutes 15.6 seconds at Stockholm.

² She threw 47.24 metres (154ft 11 1/8in) at Frankfurt.

were to be set by this remarkable athlete in later years. Despite the severe food shortages suffered by Holland in the winter of 1944-45, she set new figures for the 100 yards at Amsterdam on the 18 May 1944, and was also part of the Netherlands National team that improved Britain's long standing 4x110 yards record. By the end of the war, she held individual world records in the 100 yards, 80 metres hurdles, high and long jumps, and relay records over 4x110 yards and 4x200 metres.³ The Dutch relay team was also successful in deleting Germany's 4x200 metre time from the record books, something that must have been particularly significant at the time.⁴

Athletic activity also survived the occupation of France. Their national team established new world best figures for the 3x800 metre relay, at Paris in October 1943. This performance registered a huge improvement; they recorded 7 minutes 15.8 seconds, compared to 7 minutes 32 seconds set by the Italian club, G.S. Veni-Unica, in June 1936. Although some of these distances were not competed over regularly, the fact that performances were continuing to improve suggests that some women were training harder during these years.

The first post-war WAAA Championships for women was held in 1945. This is recognised as being the first national championship staged in Europe after the war. Pallett noted that in 1946, championships were organised for women in 'among others Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, Austria, Rumania and Yugoslavia.' Several pre-war athletes were active at their national championships. In Poland, Stanisława Walaciewicz, better known as Stella Walsh, won the 100 metres, 200 metres, 80 metre hurdles, and long jump. Their former world record holder, J. Wajsowna, won

³ Pallett, *Women's Athletics*, p. 59.

⁴ The previous long jump record was held by Germany's C. Schulz and had been set on 30 Jul. 1939. Fanny Blankers-Koen improved it by more than 5 inches, a height that was considered to have set a standard that would be impossible to improve. The high jump record was improved to 5 feet 7.25 inches (1.71 metres) and the long jump to 20 feet 6 inches (6.25 metres) at Leyden. Great Britain had previously held the 4x100 metre relay record, with 49.8 seconds set in August 1926.

the discus, and M. Kwasniewska, bronze medallist at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, won the javelin. The Austrian Championships included a win for Helen Bauma, who had competed in the 1934 Women's World Games in London. In England, Dorothy Odam continued her athletics career with silver at the re-established WAAA Championships of 1945.

International competitions were organised even in the war-ravaged Europe of 1946. For the English women, there was a small match in Strasbourg and, in October, there was a somewhat larger meeting between Rumania, Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia. This competition marked the re-establishment of the Balkan Championships, and Yugoslavia emerged as the first post-war champions.⁵ The same year also saw the first major international competition since 1938, when Oslo hosted the European Championships in October. The desire to return the sporting world to the way it had been before the war, was no doubt one reason why the athletic federations were keen to get competition organised again. It was, of course, unsurprising that the people promoting athletics should wish to see the rapid resumption of activities.

The swift revival of international competition was seen as an essential way of reviving interest in the sport. The WAAA was quick to recognise the value of sending a team to the European Championships, which they felt would not only stimulate female interest but also help to raise standards as quickly as possible. During the 1940s, there was anxiety that women's athletics was in danger of dying out. The main concern centred on the minimum age at which children could compete, as this was older than in many other sports. The women's cross country secretary warned in 1945 that unless the age was lowered, the sport risked losing its young athletes to other

⁵ Pallett, Women's Athletics. p. 60.

sports such as swimming, thus having no future.⁶ The WAAA, however, decided to defer any decision until such a time as the schools raised their leaving age. The potential chance of international competition, therefore, remained the best way of encouraging youngsters into the sport as well as retaining the interest of older and more established athletes.

The Importance of Soviet Performances

Previous chapters have discussed how women's track and field in Europe developed during the 1920's; emerging out of the internationals organised at Monte Carlo and Paris in 1921 and 1922. The Soviet Union was absent from these competitions. Sporting contact with non-communist Europe was largely limited to workers' sports meetings, until the Oslo European Championships of 1946.⁷ This was dictated by the general policy of the Russian leadership, which, as the sole communist state in Europe was extremely isolated in its economic, political and social relations. Both the groups known as the 'Hygienists' and the 'Proletkultists' attacked western 'bourgeois' sport. They argued that competition was not in keeping with socialist ideals. The difference between the two groups is made clear by James Riordan. The Proletkultists condemned all types of 'games, sports and gymnastics "tainted" by bourgeois society', while the Hygienists did recognise that some western sports could be incorporated usefully into Soviet life.⁸ The Hygienists had had the greatest

⁶ WAAA AGM minutes, 1 Dec. 1945. This was also discussed at a War Emergency Committee, 29 Sept. 1945. In addition, these meetings also considered raising the minimum age that athletes could compete in senior competitions from fifteen to sixteen. However, no decision was made.

⁷ A full discussion of Soviet sport during the 1920s and 1930s can be found in V. Peppard and J. Riordan, Playing Politics: Soviet Sport Diplomacy to 1992 (Middlesex 1993), pp. 27- 48.

⁸ J. Riordan, Sport in the USSR and the 1980 Olympic Games (Wellingborough, Northants 1979), p. 6.

influence during the 1920s. They felt that competitive sport developed into an elitist activity, diverting attention from providing physical activities for all the population. It was better, they argued, to have the majority *participating* in physical recreation rather than *watching* an elite take part in competitive sport. Lists of approved sports were drawn up, which included activities such as running, swimming and rowing. These sports could be done against oneself and the clock, rather than against other competitors.

Despite the official dislike of bourgeois, competitive sport, the appeal of such activities could not be denied. Guttmann argued that repetitive drill did not excite the Soviet citizens any more than it had British and American students.⁹ In 1920, competitive sport meetings were organised, and both the First All-Russian Pre-Olympiads and First Central Asian Olympics took place.¹⁰ In 1923 and 1924, the All-Union Physical Culture Festivals were organised, followed by national championships in 1927 and the All-Union Spartakiad in 1928. The aim, however, remained to involve as many people as possible. Sport and physical recreation was viewed by the leadership as a means of integrating the various cultures and nations that made up the USSR, as well as improving the population's physical and mental health. Athletics continued to expand during the thirties. The Soviet Union was not yet a member of the IAAF, so any records achieved by its athletes were not recognised in this period. Nevertheless, several unofficial records were claimed, including that of Nina Dumbadze, who threw a new world best in the discus.¹¹

⁹ A. Guttmann, Women's Sport. A History (New York 1991), p. 173.

¹⁰ J. Riordan, Sport in Soviet Society. Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR (Cambridge 1977), p. 80. See also, J. Riordan, Background to the Olympics (Oxford 1980), p. 30.

¹¹ G. Korobkov, 'Russia's Rise – My Inside Story', World Sports, Aug. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 8, p. 6. She threw 161 foot 2 inches (49.54 metres).

Peppard and Riordan argue that by the 1930s, 'the Soviets understood the tremendous potential sport had as a means for conducting diplomacy', and that because of this, sporting contact with the western world began to increase.¹² Although sport was obviously effected by the Second World War, in which the Soviet Union suffered huge losses, Korobkov claimed that national championships and some other large meetings were still held for athletics. By the summer of 1945, the athletics programme had begun to expand again.¹³

The Soviet desire to prove that it had recovered from the war, and was 'still strong and vital', meant that sporting contact resumed with non-communist Europe.¹⁴ Peppard and Riordan's work has referred primarily to the Moscow Dynamo soccer tour of Britain in 1945. However, one can argue that the same aim dictated the Soviet emergence in athletics in 1946. There had clearly been a purposeful delay, until it was apparent that both male and female athletes would do their country proud. Due to the changed balance of power in Europe following the war, the role that athletes were seen to have in the struggle to defeat Russia's ideological opponents had been strengthened. By 1949, there were 'ten Soviet-aligned states', and increased pressure to represent the strength of the Soviet Union was applied to its sportsmen and women. The decision to increase the USSR's role in international sport was not resented by the country's population. Instead the patriotism, that had been boosted by Soviet victories during the war as well as by losses suffered against Germany, played a crucial part in creating the desire for victory that the Soviet teams displayed in international sport.¹⁵

¹² Peppard and Riordan, Playing Politics, pp. 27- 28 and p. 44.

¹³ Korobkov, 'Russia's Rise', World Sports, Aug. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 8, p. 7. Additional information on the official description of Soviet athletes and the USSR system can be found in the second part of Korobkov's article, World Sports, Sept. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 9, pp. 14 -15.

¹⁴ Peppard and Riordan, Playing Politics, p. 55.

¹⁵ Riordan, Sport in the USSR and the 1980 Olympic Games, p. 9.

The USSR was not alone in thinking that greater contact between the eastern and western countries of Europe would be beneficial. Sport meant that the avenues of co-operation were kept open without having to investigate economic options. In addition, it maintained the image of friendly relations between the war victors. In joining the IAAF and participating in the Oslo European Athletic Championships of 1946, the Soviets displayed a 'manifestation of the desire finally to become a full-time member of the world of international sport.' It should be remembered, however, that their membership was not completed until 1952, when the first Soviet team competed at an Olympic Games.¹⁶

The 1946 European Championships was particularly significant for the women's side of the sport. In 1938, the first Women's European Championships had been held in Vienna, while the men competed in Paris. In 1946, however, they participated together at the same venue. These were the first championships to include a Russian team, and provided the sporting world with their initial look at what was to be the dominant force in women's athletics for the next fifty years. Before 1946, performances by Soviet athletes had all been recorded inside the USSR, but their potential had been noticed. Articles in both the specialist magazines and the newspapers emphasised the strength of the Soviet athletes and, in particular, the 'prodigious powers of their women.'¹⁷

The Soviet association did not apply to join the IAAF until 1945, after which a formal invitation was issued to them to compete in the 1946 European Games. However, as no reply was received they were not expected to attend. It was therefore a surprise to both the organisers and athletes when a team arrived in Norway, giving only a few days notice via a Russian radio broadcast. Interestingly this type of action did have a precedent. A Soviet team only confirmed they were travelling immediately

¹⁶ Peppard and Riordan, *Playing Politics*, pp. 59 - 63.

¹⁷ Armour Milne, 'Soviet Athletics', *Athletics*, Apr. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 5, p. 4. See also, *The Times*, 22 Aug. 1946.

before the Moscow Dynmao football match of 1945. Many officials had reservations about the USSR's team participating in the European Athletics Championships. This was primarily because of the financial support provided by the state for their elite athletes. Official British policy had repeatedly argued that no broken time payments should be allowed for athletes who lost wages while they were racing abroad. They were therefore highly unlikely to support a country that violated the amateur code so openly.¹⁸ Despite the concern expressed over this issue, the Russians were present in Oslo. It would appear that the IAAF's enthusiasm that they should be represented outweighed any misgivings about the USSR system. The Soviet sportswomen duly fulfilled the predictions made before the championship, gaining five gold medals in the nine women's events. Nevertheless, the other European nations were not totally dominated by the Soviet female athletes. While the Russians signalled their future intentions, with thirteen athletes gaining top three positions, twelve nations provided the complete total of medallists. Great Britain achieved five positions in the first three, and finished fifth in the overall results table with two silver medals gained in the high jump and 4x100 metres relay.

The Russian performances were viewed by most athletic supporters as being beneficial for the sport. Concern was expressed after Oslo, however, about the lack of communication allowed between the communist team and those of other competing nations. Sport was popularly viewed as being an objective arena, unaffected by politics and allowing men and women of all nations to mix freely. After the 1946 European Championships, the Soviet athletes were criticised for displaying 'the Iron Curtain attitude'. Critics were reassured, however, that the team had behaved more as the western nations would like at the 1950 championship. Evidence of apparent goodwill was expressed, and the Soviet athletes were complimented on their

¹⁸ The Times, 22 Aug. 1946, p. 2.

increased friendliness and 'readiness to play the games the western way'.¹⁹ This improvement in international sporting relations was interpreted as an indication that the communist team would be present in Helsinki, for the Olympic Games of 1952. The presence of these athletes was felt by many to be vital if women's standards were to continue to improve.²⁰

Although Russia was a founding member of the modern Olympic movement, and its sportsmen were present at the 1908 and 1921 Games, the country was not represented again until the Helsinki Olympics. This was, of course, an USSR team rather than a Russian contingent competing. They were represented in all the Olympic sports except field hockey. The re-emergence of the Soviet team at the Olympic Games can be explained in the same way as their participation at the European Championships in 1946. The nation's leaders saw political as well as ideological benefits in competing internationally and joined the international federations. They waited, however, until they were sure that their athletes would be successful on the world stage. It was also necessary that it was seen to be obeying IOC rules. Therefore, in June 1947, the USSR government declared that instead of monetary rewards, athletes would be presented with gold, silver and bronze badges when they achieved national or world records.²¹

¹⁹ It was seen as particularly noteworthy that even when the British requested to study the photo-finish after the women's 100 metres and, subsequently revealed that June Foulds was third and not in fact the USSR athlete, that the Soviet team remained very friendly and expressed their delight for the British athlete.

²⁰ The 1950 European Championships, held at Brussels, was considered to have shown a general improvement in women's athletic standards. The championship results can be found in Athletics Weekly, 'The European Games', 2 Sept. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 35, pp. 5-13. See also Daily Express, 29 Aug. 1950 and The Times, 24 Aug. 1950.

²¹ For a detailed analysis on why the Soviet's delayed their Olympic debut, see Peppard and Riordan, Playing Politics, pp. 63 - 65. See also, Riordan, Sport in the USSR, pp. 23 - 24. Riordan pointed out

This action did not alleviate all suspicion. J. Sigfrid Edstrom, IOC president, was left in no doubt about the political role of sport in the USSR, following a letter written to him by fellow IOC member, Colonel P. W. Scharroo. The Olympic ideal that sport should be kept separate from politics was at harm, Edstrom declared, if a Soviet delegate was accepted on to the IOC. They would merely 'be a pawn, bound hand and foot by the government'. Avery Brundage, who had succeeded Edstrom as the new IOC president by 1950, agreed with this assessment. Nevertheless, just as they were accepted into the IAAF in 1946, despite the misgivings of the member states, the USSR was accepted into the IOC only four months after Brundage had expressed this opinion. In explanation, Brundage argued that although members believed the USSR was not abiding with the IOC charter, they had no real evidence to support this view. In addition, it was felt that exchanges between eastern and western Europe could result in better relations. Finally, he explained that if they denied the USSR membership, then the Soviets would accuse the committee of allowing politics to influence sport.²²

Expectations were high that the 1952 Olympic Games would witness several new records, and it was hoped that evidence of higher standards would increase support for women's athletics. According to contemporary press reports, the USSR athletes were viewed as having the best prospects at Helsinki, and were expected to improve the performances registered at the 1946 European Games significantly. While Russian athletes had the potential to do well in the sprints, long jump and hurdles, it was in the three throwing events that they were expected to be unchallenged. Nevertheless, possible medallists from other countries were mentioned, and one reader of *Athletics Weekly* wrote an indignant letter questioning the idea of Russian dominance. He pointed out that the Australian sprinters, Marjorie Jackson

that while there was no Soviet team at the 1948 Olympics, the country was represented by a group of observers.

²² Peppard and Riordan, *Playing Politics*, pp. 65 - 69.

and Shirley Strickland, had both recently run world records. In addition, New Zealand's Yvette Williams had an equally strong chance in the long jump. Holland's Fanny Blankers-Koen (sprints and 80 metre hurdles), and Britain's Sheila Lerwill and Dorothy Tyler (both high jump) were also realistic medal winners. The only events where the Russians could almost certainly be predicted as winners were the shot putt, discus and javelin.²³

In the event, Australian athletes performed the strongest on the track in 1952. Both Shirley Strickland and Marjorie Jackson beat world records in the 80 metre hurdles and 200 metres respectively. In the throwing events, however, Russia fulfilled expectations, dominating all three disciplines. They won gold and bronze medals in the shot putt and Zybina, who was described by World Sports as 'symbolising Russia's strength', set a new world record.²⁴ In the discus they successfully completed a clean sweep, and were the only country to do so in any women's event at these games. Only a surprise victory by Dana Zatopek, wife of Emil, prevented a similar result in the javelin. Deprived of gold, the Russian athletes finished second, third and fourth. As contemporary reports acknowledged, 'in most cases they are bigger, stronger and (have) better technique.'²⁵ Clearly, the Russian coaches had prioritised the weakest female events, realising that it was in these that they would have the greatest impact and quickly achieve superiority.

Nevertheless, the strength of the Australian sprinters in this period was significant. Their performances undermine the assumption that the Soviet women dominated every event as soon as they began to compete internationally. It is impossible to say for certain if other nations were driven to improve their own standards because of the USSR's emergence in international athletics, but the Soviets

²³ Athletics Weekly, 19 Apr. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 16, p. 6.

²⁴ Dec. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 11, p. 24.

²⁵ Athletics Weekly, 9 Aug. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 32, p. 12. Emil Zatopek won the 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres, and marathon at the 1952 Olympic Games.

certainly had more than adequate competition from some individuals in Helsinki. It was not only the Australians who upset predictions of a Soviet domination. In the sprints, America produced some surprise performances. Again one would hesitate to explain the improved women's standards in this country as entirely a response to Soviet performances, but the emergence of the USSR women after the war would certainly appear to be a contributory factor. Avery Brundage had argued, on the occasion that the USSR was accepted into the IOC, that Helsinki would 'provide a direct comparison between our boys and girls and those from the communist world, (so) it is essential that we send our best and strongest team.'²⁶

Although they could not challenge the all-round strength of the Soviet team, the American women sprinters did signal their future intentions at Helsinki. They produced some strong runs in the individual events and went on to take an unexpected gold in the 4x100 metre relay. As was noted earlier, progress in the United States had been stilted for some years. Girls in education were not encouraged to compete in track and field, as their teachers saw it as unfeminine and dangerous to their health. By the 1950s, the American female athletes were again beginning to perform at world standard and respond to the challenge set down by their communist opponents. Undoubtedly as the cold war intensified, pressure resulting from the Russian successes increased calls for American women to compete well at elite level.

The Russian team increased their dominance of women's athletics during the fifties, although many of the stars of this period came from other countries. By the 1954 European Championships in Berne, however, there was no denying that the Soviets were the strongest team in women's athletics. The USSR team won seven out of a possible ten gold medals. They gained a clean sweep in the discus and the shot putt, while their track athletes also dominated for the first time. There can be little doubt that during the mid-fifties the Russian performances were viewed as being superior to anything witnessed in the past. It was not simply a case of their

²⁶ Peppard and Riordan, *Playing Politics*, p. 70.

performances being better, but also that their technique was taking women's athletics into a new era. In this way, they were increasingly seen as primarily responsible for the general improvement of women's standards that was witnessed during the second half of the 1950s:

One could not fail to be impressed by the Russian girl runners, particularly Itkina, Turova and Otkalenko, all of whom have actions which many a male runner would like to emulate. Their times, too, come to that, for their performances are now up to a very useful club standard for men.²⁷

The Importance of the Matches between British and Soviet Athletes

Several matches were held between British and Soviet teams during the fifties, with the London athletes experiencing most of the competition. As they neared the end of the long 1954 season, the London athletes hosted a match at the White City. This was the first competition held between the two nations. Jack Crump along with Jack Oaten, who represented the event sponsors News of the World, had carried out negotiations with the Soviet athletic chiefs directly after the European Championships. Although it was publicised as being between London and Moscow, Crump, who was the team manager, stated that the Soviet officials failed to understand this and sent what was virtually a full-strength team. This continued to be the case for most of the London versus Moscow matches of this period, and in response the British officials 'used the flimsiest of reasons for including leading athletes in our so-called London team.'²⁸

²⁷ 'Reflections on The European Championships', Athletics Weekly, 11 Sept. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 37, p. 12.

²⁸ Crump, Running Round The World (1966), p. 153.

Perhaps more important was the 'tremendous enthusiasm' that the match generated. A large crowd attended what was consistently defined as the highlight of the domestically held matches. In addition, many more watched it on television. After the London match the Russian team competed in Manchester, and again displayed their all-round strength in front of an excited and curious audience. The USSR athletes were clearly instrumental in creating public interest, as well as helping to stimulate an improvement in competition standards.

In September of 1955, the first full-scale British international team competed in Moscow. This was their first trip to the communist country and was regarded as highly symbolic. Both the men's and women's matches were held on a single day, which was unusual. So was the decision of the Soviet officials to add the scores together for the final aggregate points total.²⁹ The decision to hold the match on a single day meant that the 800 metre athletes had to run twice, first in the individual race and then in a relay. Some sprinters competed three times. This marked a departure from the accepted wisdom that women could not cope with too much competition on one day, especially in the case of the longer distance. There was no concern after the race, providing further evidence that the 800 metre event was well within the capability of trained female athletes.

Although both the male and female British teams were comprehensively beaten, Crump later wrote that both nations thought it was a 'great success', not only from the athletic point of view but also in cementing relations. One athlete present at the match, 800 metre runner Betty Loakes, recalled that the Soviet coaches were keen to discuss ideas with their British counterparts. This contrasted with the usual criticism of Soviet secrecy at international championships.

²⁹ Crump, Running Round The World, p.152-153. The match was held soon after the European Championships of 1954. Crump described it as 'excellent' for Great Britain. See also 'Jack Crump's Gossip...Talking About Britain's Women in Moscow and Prague', World Sports, Nov. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 11, p. 34-35. Most matches of this size were organised over two days.

The team was 'feted' in Moscow and trips to the Bolshoi and the Kremlin were organised by Soviet officials to show the state in its best light.³⁰ Some commentators felt that the trips were largely propaganda exercises for the Soviet authorities. However, the standard of organisation, facilities and performances, persuaded officials like Crump that the USSR would be worthy hosts of an Olympic Games. Clearly the aim of improving relations via sport was working. The competitions with Britain helped to create a favourable image of the USSR to a largely suspicious western audience.

For athletes like Betty Loakes, racing against the Soviets provided an opportunity to witness supremely fit athletes in action. She felt that there was no doubt that the USSR women were fitter and better trained. Diane Leather expressed a similar opinion. She wrote that their methods were thought to be more intense and scientific.³¹ Contemporary athletes and coaches developed new ideas, based on the realisation that women could undergo more rigorous training and compete to a higher standard than had previously been accepted in Britain. However, the importance of the Soviet matches was not restricted to the athletic world. Team officials believed that the events provided an opportunity to improve political relations between the two countries. Crump reported that he was told by the Foreign Office that

our ambassadors in these countries referred to the good work with which these visits constituted. Moreover, they reported most favourably upon the behaviour of our athletes and the excellent impression we as a team had created, comparing us more favourably with other sports, who

³⁰ Interview with Mrs Betty Smith (née Loakes), 17 Feb. 1955

³¹ Interview with Mrs Betty Smith, and written correspondence with Diane Charles (née Leather), Jul. 1996.

by their poor results or more boisterous behaviour had, in their view, let this country down.³²

Comments made in the athletics press revealed how important the competitions were in bringing women's athletics to the attention of the public. The standard of performances could not be ignored, and were reported in a complimentary fashion. There was no hint of the subsequent language that suggested foul play. This aspect became common in later years, and was a characteristic of the American press reports in particular. Some criticisms that were expressed in this period were included in an article published in Athletics Weekly entitled 'Can Sport Crack the Iron Curtain?'.³³ Alexander Johnston protested about the Soviet policy of paying their elite athletes. He was particularly keen to emphasise the difference in the traditional British attitude towards sport, with that of the more professional nations.

The fear that sport was being used for political aims was a recurring theme in the fifties. Joseph Wechsberg's article, 'How Russia hopes to win the Olympic Games' (1955), quoted from Pravda that sport was viewed by the communist party and Soviet government as an essential method of communist education. The athletics press suggested 'that Russia is making athletics a weapon in achieving a propaganda victory for Communism', and that

³² Crump, Running Round The World, p. 155.

³³ Alexander Johnson, Athletics Weekly, 6 Nov. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 45, pp. 10 - 13. It should be noted that the USSR was not the only country that was suspected, or known to have financially supported their elite athletes. Poland was reported to provide £40 a week, and the Scandinavian countries had long supported 'broken time' payments for athletes losing wages while representing their country. At the 1956 Olympic Games, several nations paid a small allowance to their athletes. Initially Britain did not and this caused friction between athletes and officials. The allowance was drawn from money provided for each participating nation by the IAAF.

Soviet victories are always the result of "correct Socialist training." Soviet athletes don't merely try to run 100 m in 10.4 secs for the sense of achievement it gives them, but because they are prepared "to defend the Motherland from any enemy who plans to destroy the peaceful and creative life of the Soviet people." Defeats are caused by "insufficient ideological education."³⁴

In his article, Johnston went as far as to suggest that Britain should not compete against the Soviet team, as the British athletes were not provided with the same resources and therefore were likely to be repeatedly beaten. He argued that this was bad for the country, as the Russians along with other nations would view Britain as weak. This view was neither unique nor original. In 1933, comments in The Times noted that 'continental sports are questions of national prestige ... Foreigners take their sports seriously and cannot believe that England does not do likewise'.³⁵ Johnston's rather neurotic view was balanced by George Pallett's article, 'Ten Days With The Russians'. Pallett took the view that political issues had nothing to do with the Soviet teams competing in the west, and described their athletes in much more favourable terms. He emphasised their fitness and declared that they showed 'such intense team spirit as to shame many prominent athletes'.³⁶ The level of competition that the Russian team provided was for Pallett, and indeed many lovers of athletics, far more important than any political controversies.

The failure of the British women to beat the USSR should not be interpreted as evidence that the former were no longer a force within athletics. They were in fact experiencing a lot more success than their male counterparts. In 1954, before

³⁴ World Sports, Nov. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 11, p. 11. J. Wechsberg's article was published in Reader's Digest, May 1955.

³⁵ 11 Sept. 1933.

³⁶ 'Ten days With the Russians', Athletics Weekly, 13 Nov. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 46, pp. 8-9.

competing at the European Games, the British women's team gained victories against West Germany and France. Thirteen athletes travelled on an Eastern European tour to Hungary and Czechoslovakia shortly after the championships. Performances were better than at Berne, and the team beat Czechoslovakia by ten points (58-48) and Hungary by five (59-54). During this tour, Diane Leather recorded the world class time of 2 minutes 09.2 seconds in the 800 metres. This was an important morale booster for British women's middle-distance running, which had yet to be accorded the same attention that the sprinting events enjoyed. Leather's time showed that she was not far behind the Russian performances.

Just how close she could get, was shown at the European Championships in Stockholm in 1958. She repeated her silver medal position of the previous games and split the Russian athletes, Ermolaeva, and Levitskaja. For the first time, all three British representatives were successful in making the final, with Betty Loakes finishing eighth and Joy Jordan ninth.³⁷ It would seem that Leather had stimulated other British women to improve their own performances. In turn, one would have expected that the successes of the Russian athletes in the longer distance would have motivated women like Diane Leather. However, she denies that they caused her to increase or change her training methods.³⁸ Training was becoming more intense during the fifties anyway, and this coincided with the emergence of the Russian women rather than causing the trend. Possibly, the Soviet teams reassured coaches and athletes that women could cope with more, but they did not appear to initiate the new methods. Instead, Emil Zatopek, who had won the 5,000 and 10,000 metres, as

³⁷ The practice of running from a curved start for the 800 metres, which caused Britain's Rawson to be temporarily disqualified in the men's races, meant that nine women competed in the 1958 Stockholm European Championships final. In modern competition, the races are run in lanes for the first 100 metres, with a maximum of eight runners in a championship event.

³⁸ Personal correspondence with Diane Charles.

well as the marathon at the 1956 Olympics, was recognised as a role model for both male and female distance runners.

Gold medal success was not entirely the preserve of the Soviet nations at Stockholm. Britain's Heather Young, who had been second at the 1958 Empire Games, was given the same time as the USSR's Krepkina, but was judged to have won. Any victory over the powerful Soviet women by a British athlete during the fifties was heralded as a great achievement.³⁹ In 1954, at the Berne European Championships, Jean Desforges won the gold in the long jump in a championship record. The News Chronicle provided front-page coverage of the result, with an accompanying photograph of Desforges who was the women's team captain. The significance of the victory was underlined in their additional report on the back page. This had the headline, 'Typist from London Outjumps Champion of Russia'. The contrast of British amateur athletics with the might of the Soviet Union was emphasized by the inclusion of Desforges' occupation, which was presented in humble terms. Not only had she achieved this for Britain, but also for British sporting attitudes and methods.⁴⁰

The Soviet team victories were a reflection of their all-round strength. In 1954, when the British team travelled to Moscow, the USSR athletes won by thirty-five points (83-48) and this was largely due to their dominance in the throwing events. These disciplines had always been the weakest within British athletics, for both the men and women. The subject was continually debated with the recognition that more competition and additional coaching was required. More importantly, there had to be a change in attitude by British athletes who had no tradition in the throwing events to inspire them.

³⁹ Minutes of WAAA AGM, 7 Feb. 1959. Great Britain won a totally unexpected silver in the relay.

⁴⁰ News Chronicle, 27 Aug. 1954. See also the photo of Desforges in this paper that shows her taking her record breaking jump of 19 feet 10 inches (6.05 metres). The caption reads 'It's a gold medal - and for Britain too'.

The continued pressure on sportswomen to remain within a particular definition of femininity did little to encourage an increase in the number of women throwing. For example, it is doubtful if the words chosen by George Pallett would have inspired anyone to try a new event:

When shall we persuade the hefty wenches who certainly exist in this country that athletics has a place for them even if no other sport has ...

We need the outsizes in women's athletics.⁴¹

Pallett made similar comments in the same magazine when he reviewed the 1955 Moscow match:

The less said about the throwing events the better, for our efforts were puny compared to the Russian's performances. While our competitors remain puny, though charming by comparison to those Russian "amazons," so will their results be similar by comparison. One couldn't help wondering how Ponomareva would fare against our men if she used their discus!⁴²

The Soviet team had no such problems of recruitment, and from the moment they emerged in international athletics they dominated the throwing events. While general standards improved in these disciplines, it was a rare occasion when the USSR athletes did not take the majority of the medals at the major games. When Jack Crump reviewed the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games in World Sports, he predicted without hesitation that Soviet athletes would win all three throwing events. He

⁴¹ 'In Perspective - Britain's Women in 1954', Athletics Weekly, 1 Jan. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 1, pp. 14 -15.

⁴² Athletics Weekly, 17 Sept. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 38, p. 7.

declared that 'the entries will probably be small: there seems little point in sending women weight-putters to Melbourne just to get trounced by the Russians'.⁴³ Six of the medals won by the USSR at the 1956 Olympic Games were won in the throwing events, with the remaining two in the high jump and long jump. In contrast, the Australians, who also enjoyed significant success in Melbourne and won only one less gold medal than the Soviets, succeeded in the events traditionally accepted as feminine; the sprints and 80 metre hurdles.⁴⁴

By the Rome Olympics of 1960, the Soviet women had successfully achieved superiority in a variety of events. It was no longer assumed that they would only dominate the throwing events. USSR representatives competed in every final, and had all three of their athletes in the finals of both the discus and 80 metre hurdles. Only three countries gained gold medals: the Soviet team won six, the United States of America three and Rumania one. In addition, the USSR had eighteen athletes in the first six places of the events they competed in, compared to Germany's twelve, Britain's eight, Poland and the USA's five, and Australia's two. The only events that were denied to the Russian team were the high jump and the sprints. While a Rumanian athlete was victorious in the high jump, America underlined its growing strength in the short sprints, winning the 100 metres, 200 metres and the 4x100 metres relay.

⁴³ 'Women's Athletics and Walking. Predicting the Unpredictable?', Nov. 1955, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 33. See also, 'Jack Crump's Gossip', Jul. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 7, p. 42, and 'Crump's Gossip', World Sports, Aug. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 8, p. 22. The latter article predicts the results of the Great Britain versus Russia match. Crump predicted that Soviet throwers would gain maximum points and would win the match. One example of their dominance was the shot putt, where the best four Soviet athletes had thrown two metres further than anyone else had in Europe during 1955.

⁴⁴ Official WAAA Report on the 1956 Olympic Games. Britain were fifth, just behind the improving USA. Britain won a silver in the high jump and in the 4x100 metres relay.

Relationships between the east and west altered several times during the fifties, as the shifting temperature of the cold war dictated international relations. By the 1956 Olympic Games the atmosphere was particularly strained. This was because of the Soviet's role in defeating the uprisings in Hungary and Poland. Nevertheless, the annual competition for London athletes was planned against Russia during the season of 1956, although in the end it was cancelled following the withdrawal of the Russian team. Their female discus Olympic gold medallist Nina Ponomareva was accused of shoplifting hats from C. and A. Modes in Oxford Street and was subsequently charged. The Russian team management strongly denied the accusations and shielded their athlete within the Embassy. The team withdrew on 31 August having failed to get the charges dropped, and the previous goodwill between Britain and Russia was damaged. The Russian team manager argued that Ponomareva had been falsely accused in order to prevent her from competing, and this was followed by a statement by the official Russian agency Tass, which declared that

Certain circles (who are) aiming at preventing, by all means, the improvement and development of sporting relations between the Soviet Union and Great Britain took an advantage of the fact that Nina does not speak English, and does not know their existing regulations (that) it is necessary to ask for a receipt for the goods purchased, and made an unbelievable accusation of alleged theft.

The aim of this provocation was to slander this world famous sportswoman in such a way intentionally to prevent her from taking part in the match.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ The Times, 1 Sept. 1956, p. 3, 3 Sept. 1956, 4 Sept. 1956, and 5 Sept. 1956. See also Crump, Running Round The World, p. 163.

The teams themselves were at pains to show that not all goodwill had been lost. They trained together 'amicably' on 2 September and a member of the AAA General Committee took some of the Russian team to see Windsor Castle. Two of the Soviet hammer throwers also honoured a previous promise to give a demonstration to the British Hammer Throwers Circle. The official line, however, was somewhat harsher. Harold Abrahams wrote that the withdrawal had been unavoidable, due to the Russian reluctance to realise that they could not change the law by political pressure in Britain. Two meetings between the Foreign Office and the Russian ambassador, and one with the British Ambassador in Moscow followed. Again, the Russian's expressed their allegations that Nina had been wrongly arrested in order to pervert sporting relations between the two nations. Finally the imminent sixteenth Olympic Games of Melbourne diverted attention from this issue, but while the press eventually moved on to other subjects the athlete in question was tainted forever, subsequently described as Nina 'five hats' Ponomareva in athletic reports.⁴⁶

The relationship between the two countries had undoubtedly been damaged. Crump confirmed the seriousness with which the BAAB viewed the withdrawal of the Soviet team, by reporting that an official complaint had been made to the IAAF. Britain would have no choice but to end the regular matches between the two countries. The significance of this was not lost on some athletic followers, one of whom felt that the political consequences outweighed personal disappointment:

I was one of those fans who were deprived of a fine pre-Olympic athletics match when the Russian team was withdrawn from their clash with Great Britain at London's White City ... But the disappointment lay less in the actual scratching of the Russian team than in the fear of disastrous results, political and sporting.

⁴⁶ 'Nina And The Hats', Letter by Mr Brian May in World Sports, Nov. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 52.

Those concerned in charging Nina Ponomaryeva, who was alleged to have taken some hats from a London store, could not have realised at the time that they were endangering not only our chances of friendly sport with the USSR, but political relations as well.⁴⁷

In addition to threatening political relations and the public disappointment, there was also significant financial loss incurred by the cancelling of the international match. Every reserved seat at the White City had been sold, and a sell-out crowd anticipated. The News of the World, which was sponsoring the event, refunded all tickets at a cost of £14,000. Without the support of Sir William Carr of the News of the World, British athletics would have faced a financial crisis.

The Melbourne Olympics provided an opportunity for the situation to be resolved. Crump had again travelled with the team in the role of team manager, and soon after the British men's team arrived in the village, the USSR team officials visited him. An invitation for both the men and women to travel to Moscow in 1957 was issued. Crump declined explaining that no further competitions could be arranged before the British complaints had been discussed at the IAAF Congress. This was scheduled for immediately after the Olympic Games. The Soviet representatives were disturbed by this and asked Crump how the situation could be resolved. He replied that a USSR team would have to come to London in 1957 at their own expense, in order to fulfil the obligations made when the aborted match had been arranged. This was agreed to, and both nations subsequently wrote to the IAAF, informing them that the situation had been resolved and that it would not need to be discussed at the congress.

⁴⁷ Crump, Running Round The World, pp. 163-164. Crump says that six weeks after the Soviet team left, Ponomareva stood bail and was found guilty of stealing five hats and fined £3. She returned directly to the USSR where, he reports, she received a heroine's welcome.

The 1957 match went ahead as planned, and 'goodwill between our two associations (was) restored.' Apparently, the international matches between British and Soviet athletes were as important to the USSR officials as they were to the BAAB. Not only did they provide an ideal opportunity to prove the athletic prowess of the Soviets, but they also enabled them to strengthen friendly links with western nations.⁴⁸

The Soviet athletes did not let the controversy disturb their momentum, and they continued to tighten their grip on women's athletics during the fifties. The importance that the Soviet athletic association placed on the women's side of the sport was not only evident from their athletes' performances. The officials were also keen to increase their influence within the international associations. One of the main roles that the USSR representatives played was to encourage the IOC and IAAF to accept more events for women. The first attempt to achieve female representation on the IOC was made by delegates from the USSR, Australia, and the United States at the Rome Congress of 1960. The Olympic Committee rejected the appeal, and it was not until the Baden Baden Session, under President Samaranch in 1981 that women were co-opted.⁴⁹

Throughout the fifties, Soviet representatives were prominent on the IAAF commission for women's sports. By the late 1950s, both the president and secretary of the Women's Commission of the IAAF were from the USSR: Mrs Z. Romanova, and Mrs Z. Zarubina respectively. It was from this base that they made their calls for a wider range of female events. The commission also struggled to get the IAAF to recognise, as official events, both the 400 metres and 440 yards, and the 1500 metres

⁴⁸ Crump, Running Round The World, pp. 172-173.

⁴⁹ F. Kidane, 'Women in The Olympic Movement', Continental Sports, Aug-Sept-Oct. 1987, No. 36, pp. 25-26. Samaranch became president in 1980. The first women elected into the IOC were Pirjo Haggman from Finland and Flor Isava-Fonseca from Venezuela. The first woman from Great Britain to be elected was Mary Alison Glen-Haig in 1982.

and the mile. This would mean that record lists for these events would become official, and there would be a far greater chance of the races being incorporated into the European Championships and Olympic Games. In 1956, 'The Light Athletic Section of the USSR' sent four proposals to the IAAF Congress. These included the recommendations that both the pentathlon and 800 metres should be included for women in the 1960 Olympic Games. In addition, they illustrated their concern for the future, by asking the IAAF to establish a committee to 'study and prepare rules and regulations' for junior athletic competitions. The Soviet Light Athletic Section recommended that all delegates to the women's commission should be elected from the female representatives of the national federations. This would have meant the commission was exclusively female, and would lessen the chance of opposition to new events being gender based. The Russians had a personal stake in expanding the number of events for women, because the success of their female athletes was seen as providing proof of the benefits of a communist system. While other countries, particularly Britain, which was represented by members of the WAAA, also supported the expansion of the female athletics programme, the USSR undoubtedly encouraged changes and provided powerful support for new opportunities.⁵⁰

The Restrictions on Women's Events and a Gradual Expansion of Competition, 1945-60

When the European Championships opened in 1946, the track and field federations signalled to the sporting world that international activities had been re-established. The international governing bodies did not consider this time to be an ideal opportunity to introduce new events, but instead chose a policy whereby post-war international meetings reflected those of the 1930s. It was hardly surprising that the governing bodies were reluctant to alter their programmes. Sporting leaders were

⁵⁰ Agenda Of The Twentieth Congress Of The IAAF, Melbourne, 3- 4 Dec. 1956.

no doubt more concerned with simply re-establishing their activities. In the case of major games, large numbers of people needed to be transported across Europe to the venue, and then be accommodated once they arrived. The widespread destruction, and the problem of remaining bombsites that was suffered by all the European countries, hindered free movement. Together with the financial implications, these problems worked against any likelihood of an expanded programme. An increased number of events would have meant additional expense, for both the organisers and each individual nation competing. Finally, IAAF regulations demanded that any changes to the programme had to be agreed at their congress, and the first one of these to be held following the war was not organised until after the Oslo Games. The women's programme at the 1946 European Championships did include the 200 metres and shot putt, neither of which had previously been available at the Olympic Games. However, the significant point is that these changes had first been introduced at the 1938 European Championships for women. The war, therefore, should not be seen as a catalyst leading to the development of more enlightened opinions from the international governing bodies.

When explaining why additional events were not introduced for women during the immediate post-war years, one needs to consider contemporary social attitudes as well as looking at practical reasons. Although the government was soon to campaign for single women to remain in the workforce, because of a shortage of employable men, women returned to their traditional employment and domestic roles once the war began drawing to a close. It was continually argued that the traditional roles of wife and mother were beneficial, for both the good of society and the individual. Family lives should ideally be based on the model of pre-war years, when the 'cult of domesticity' had been praised in women's magazines as well as political speeches. Clearly, there was a desire to see the world return to 'normal', as it had been before the outbreak of war. Rather than leading to an emergence of new, modern ideas, war and the subsequent dividing of families created a conservative backlash that had the family, home and marriage as its central theme. However, it was not

simply a case of men forcing women back into the home. Many women took an active part in this drive to return to pre-war lifestyles. According to a Mass Observation survey, by 1944 less than a quarter of women wanted to remain in their current employment. Many were apparently anxious to withdraw from their war-time jobs, return to the home and begin a family.

As it had been after the First World War, concern was expressed during the forties over the changed roles of men and women. The sight of women in public places without chaperones, strengthened anxiety about an imbalance of the sexes. They were seen to be impinging on male space and were certainly not always welcome. Throughout the Second World War, there had been warnings about the loosening of morals and the decline in standards of behaviour. This was chiefly due to the influx of working women whom were seen out at night and in public houses. Pugh has argued that this concern was largely exaggerated and should not be viewed as indicative of long-term social change. Nevertheless, pressure to return to older, 'more moral' values continued well into the 1950s, and restricted the amount of freedom women retained once the war ended.⁵¹

It would be naïve, therefore, to expect any dramatic increase in women's sporting opportunities in either the forties or early fifties. As was illustrated at both the 1946 European Championships and the 1948 Olympic Games, official opinion over what events were considered to be feminine appropriate were largely unchanged. Just as society in general encouraged women to return to their traditional roles, so the sporting world resisted pressure to offer more opportunities to its female competitors. At Oslo in 1946, women's participation was still restricted to four track races, the 100 metres, 200 metres, 80 metre hurdles and the 4x100 metres relay. This was the same programme as at the women's 1938 European Championships, which together with the men's championships at Paris was the final major games held before the Second World War. All three throwing events, in addition to long jump and high jump, had

⁵¹ M. Pugh, Women And The Women's Movement In Britain 1914-1959 (1992), pp. 273-275.

also been included in the 1938 championships. The size of the women's programme, which was significantly larger than at the 1936 Olympic Games, was no doubt due to the fact that these championships replaced the Women's World Games. The latter had been, of course, under the auspices of the FSFI until they agreed to allow the IAAF to take control.

The event programme at the 1948 Olympic Games was the same as at the Oslo European Championship two years earlier. The WAAA argued that as long as a girl had been correctly trained, the 800 metre event was not too strenuous. The association had hoped for the race to be re-introduced at the London Olympiad, but the IOC again rejected this. The BAAB representative Mr Holt reported in May of 1947 that neither the 800 metres nor pentathlon would be part of the forthcoming Olympic Games. Practicalities were again put forward as the reason. Any alterations to the programme had to be agreed at the IOC Congress and this was not held until after the 1948 Games. It remained the case, however, that attitudes about physical capabilities had not altered enough to allow the longer track events to be an accepted part of the Olympic programme. The inclusion of the 200 metres, shot putt and long jump in the 1948 Olympic programme was also not a result of changing opinions after the war. All three events had previously been agreed on for the abandoned 1940 Olympiad. The greater freedom that some women enjoyed during the war, both economically and socially, did not have an immediate effect on their subsequent athletic opportunities at international level of competition. Indeed, the 200 metres remained the longest distance available at the European Championships until 1954 and at the Olympic Games until 1960, when on both occasions the 800 metres was included.

The Official British Olympic Report stated that the performances in 1948, which included three new Olympic Records in the high jump, javelin and 80 metre hurdles, supported the inclusion of more events 'in due course'. The honorary manager of the British team Jack Crump, was correct, however, when he said that the women would not be rewarded in the next games. At the 1956 Olympiad held in

Melbourne, female competitors were still restricted to the nine events they had participated in at the 1948 Games. The Olympic movement had always been conservative and slow to bring about change and this was not about to alter.

There was a record number of women competing at the 1948 London Olympiad, partly due to the increased number of events. A record 385 sportswomen participated, representing thirty-three countries. However, women still only had access to 12.7 percent of events and comprised just 9.4 percent of all athletes. As Simri has emphasised, statistics should not be taken at face value. An increase in participation did not necessarily mean that women had gained a significant victory in the struggle for greater equality. The fact that twenty-six countries declined to send any female representative to this Olympiad was more revealing. Parity of opportunity could certainly not be claimed. As far as the number of women participating in the sport was concerned, athletics was getting more popular all the time. It certainly did not appear that there was any danger of it dying out, which had been feared at the end of the war by some members of the WAAA. A record number of 518 women, comprising 10.5 percent of all competitors, participated in the Helsinki Olympics of 1952. This was the first time that women comprised more than ten percent of Olympic competitors. The track and field events included 184 women, representing thirty-seven countries. The USSR, present at its first Olympiad, sent twenty women. This was the largest female team, reflecting the Soviet policy of providing the same status to women's sport as it did to men's.⁵²

The situation had further improved by the 1956 Olympic Games, but while sixty-one nations sent athletes to Melbourne, only thirty-nine included a women's team. Altogether, 580 women participated compared to 2,848 men. The greatest support for the women's events came from the Soviet Union, with forty-six athletes. Great Britain sent forty-five and America thirty-nine. India, despite its 350 million population sent only seven females, two less than South Africa whose women 'were

⁵² U. Simri, A Concise World History of Women's Sports (Netanya 1983), pp. 90-91, p. 247, p. 264.

restricted to members of the white race.' From the European countries, Spain, Luxembourg, Greece, Liechtenstein and Ireland failed to send any women, while only three or four represented several others. Every participating nation sent more men than women, although some of this difference can be attributed to the greater number of events that men competed in. Nevertheless, even taking this into consideration the differential was significant. In the case of the Soviet Union, 163 team members were male compared to forty-six women. The female athletes made up twenty-two percent of the team and scored twenty-six points. In comparison, women represented twenty-five percent of Great Britain's team of 180 athletes and were responsible for twenty-three of their points.⁵³

For some countries, problems of culture and religion as well as financial restrictions meant that women were absent from the Olympiad. Female participation in any sport was not a universal phenomenon, especially for adult women. Religion, which is recognised to be a reason why women from many Asian countries failed to attend sporting competitions, also influenced Ireland's position. Successive Popes had expressed their dislike of women and girls participating in sport, claiming that it was both unfeminine and immoral. In 1954, the Pope warned that many young women did not realise the 'harm caused by the exaggerations of certain gymnastic and sporting exercises (which) are not fitting for virtuous young women.' Reasons other than religion also need to be considered. Countries were still struggling to recover

⁵³ These figures are taken from a study carried out by E. Jokl, M. J. Karvonen, A. Koskela and L. Noro, Sports in the Cultural Pattern of the World. A Study of the 1952 Olympic Games At Helsinki (Helsinki, Finland 1952), pp. 41- 44. See also Olympic Games 1956. British Olympic Association Official Report, p.15.

economically after the war, and women were often the first to be omitted if the size of a team had to be reduced.⁵⁴

While the range of women's events did not increase dramatically, significant change in the attitudes expressed by those watching did occur at the 1948 Olympic Games. Twenty-two years after the first women competed in Olympic track and field, their performances were finally recognised by officials as good enough to be rightfully included. Rather than any shift in opinion by the international governing bodies, it was the achievements of the women competing that resulted in growing support for female participation during these Games. In 1990, when Athletics Today reviewed the first post-war Olympics, it declared that

Nineteen forty-eight was the year of the Wembley Olympics, not only a revival of the Olympic spirit but the moment of emancipation of women's sport. The world had seen nothing like the young women who sprinted, hurdled and jumped with abandonment, led by the amazing Fanny Blankers-Koen.⁵⁵

The British Olympic Association Official Report of the 1948 Games, agreed that

The magnificent sprinting and hurdling of the Netherlands athlete, Mrs F. E. Blankers-Koen is partly responsible for this important change in attitude, whilst the thrilling high jump duel between Mrs A. Coachman (USA) and Britain's Dorothy Tyler proved conclusively that the public will watch top class women's athletics with absorbed attention.

⁵⁴ 'The Pope's Warning To Women', The Times, 19 Jul. 1954. He was addressing 6,000 members of the 'Daughter's of Mary' from forty-three countries. Guttmann, Women's Sports, pp. 154 -155 provides more detail on religion.

⁵⁵ T. Ward, 'Still Fighting and Winning', 10 May 1990, Vol. 4, No. 19, p. 19.

Women athletes can take considerable pride in the fact that their performances, their technique, their sportsmanship and general behaviour at Wembley removed many of the objections which had been advanced by critics who opposed their inclusion in the Olympic Games.⁵⁶

Many of the spectators were present at their first major Games and this was the only time that they would have seen women competing. The high standard of performances, not only by Blankers-Koen but also by the British women's team, must have helped raise both awareness and support for the sport.

Comments in both The Official Report of The Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad and The British Olympic Association Official Report showed clearly that this Olympic Games was considered to have played a crucial part in increasing support for female athletics:

The XIV Olympiad can be said to have placed women's track and field athletics firmly on the Olympic programme. Admittedly, athletics for women has figured previously in the Games, but not until Wembley had the public taken seriously the endeavours of the fair sex in a branch of sport, which has, on the whole been regarded as predominantly masculine.⁵⁷

It can be concluded that while progress was undoubtedly made in the years prior to and immediately following the 1948 Olympic Games, it would be wrong to assume that opposition had been entirely overcome. The IOC Congress held

⁵⁶ p. 34.

⁵⁷ British Olympic Association Official Report of The London Olympic Games 1948, p. 34

immediately after the Olympiad did not agree to any increase in the number of events. Change, when it did occur, was slow to arrive and long over-due. In his brief history of women's participation in the Games, Dr Fr. M. Messerli, historiographer of the IOC, is in no doubt that official opposition remained within the Olympic governing body:

Women's sport is making steady progress, the number of women competitors always increasing, notwithstanding the fact that despite the repeated request of feminist Milieux, a relatively limited number of competitions are accessible to women.

We are of the opinion that these restrictions are all for the good, seeing that woman has a noble task in life, namely to give birth to healthy children and to bring them up in the best conditions.

It is wise; therefore, to curb her natural impulse which often leads her to overdo sports, especially strenuous ones, thus restricting her accessibility to competitive performances.⁵⁸

Articles in the press also underline the contemporary concern to present female athletes as feminine and attractive. The fear that some events would cause physical damage and lead to the masculinisation of women, remained a reason why a restricted female programme was still advocated after the war. There was still considerable discussion in 1950, about whether women could safely participate in strenuous sports without losing 'the symmetrical roundness of muscle that is so typical of female beauty, or if she can still bear healthy children.' Holland's Fanny Blankers-Koen was seen as proof that a woman could train and race, as well as

raising a family. Alongside her, Dorothy Tyler was provided as a British example, while Sylvia Cheeseman was cited as proving that feminine athletes could reach elite level.⁵⁹ Despite the exploits of such women, many people continued to urge caution before more events were introduced at the major games. Many medical arguments still concentrated on the possible harm to women's reproductive organs, and were extremely influential in any debates about widening female participation. For those arguing for the exclusion of women's events in international competition, as well as those advocating the dangers of expanding the women's programme, such views remained a powerful ally.

The expectation that women's appearance and behaviour should remain within society's norms controlled her self-image and limited what activities she could participate in. Bearing this in mind, it was not surprising that the sprinting events at the 1948 Olympics had by far the highest number of entrants. There were nine heats for the 100 metres and seven for the 200 metres, indicating a significant demand for the longer distance. While women competing in the sprinting events had more support, they were not entirely free from the need to display caution. The 100 metres was restricted to three rounds in contrast to the four organised for the men. This meant that only the first two athletes in each heat progressed through to the semi-final, rather than the first three. Although seen as blatantly unfair by the British team manager, his accompanying remarks showed that the desire to 'protect' female athletes from 'overstrain' had to come before fair play. He stated that 'the cutting out

⁵⁸ Cited in M. Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation in Summer Olympic Games 1900-1948', (Ph.D. thesis, Ohio University, 1974), p. 422 - 423.

⁵⁹ D. F. Featherstone MSCP, 'Who says The Weaker Sex?' in *Athletics Weekly*, 13 May 1950, Vol. 4, No. 19, p. 4-5.

of a semi-final round has much to commend it' since some women competed in all four track events; namely the 100 metres, 200 metres, 80 metres hurdles and the 4x100 metres relay.⁶⁰ The throwing events, considered more masculine, had fewer competitors and received fewer positive reports. Indeed, it is difficult to see how the shot putt received the necessary official support to be granted a place in 1948. It was immediately criticised by Avery Brundage, who made it clear that he did not agree with its inclusion. Furthermore, he called for the exclusion of all the more physical events, arguing that female Olympic events should be limited to those he considered to be appropriate to their sex. By this, he meant sports such as swimming, tennis, figure skating and fencing.⁶¹

The IOC was not alone in advocating this policy. The American Women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation, set up after the AAU had agreed in 1923 to accept women in track and field, swimming, gymnastics, basketball and handball, repeatedly petitioned the IOC to withdraw the entire female programme. The Women's Board of the United States Olympic Development Committee was also fiercely against female competition in activities such as the shot putt and discus. In 1966, when the IOC tried to get these events removed from the women's programme the Board supported them, arguing that 'often the feminine self-image is badly mutilated when women perform in these two sports.'⁶² As late as

⁶⁰ British Olympic Report, p. 34-35. Very few women actually did all four events, and fewer still reached the final in each one. Fanny Blankers-Koen was the only female athlete who did so in 1948 and, as she won all four events, can hardly be said to have suffered unduly. However, she did subsequently complain about the stress caused by being the favourite in all four events.

⁶¹ J. Hargreaves, Sporting Females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994), p. 216.

⁶² Guttman, Women's Sports, pp. 141- 142. See also Hargreaves, *Op Cit*.

1973, Brundage reasserted his dislike of female shot putting, despite the fact that women had been competing since the 1948 Olympics without any cause for concern. In addition, it should be remembered that the shot putt had been included, again without any reported problems, as early as the Women's Olympics in 1922.

The seasons that did not include a major championship were far from being insignificant. Non-championship years in this period did not mean that international competition was rare. It was during these seasons that one could trace the expansion of international competition most clearly. As Europe began to emerge from the aftermath of war, competition continued to expand. In 1953, for example, the British women were involved in matches against France, Germany and the Netherlands. They also travelled to Czechoslovakia and Hungary, for two competitions held at Budapest and Ostavia. The importance of smaller internationals as a way of preparing athletes for major championships was recognised by the honorary secretary of the WAAA. However, it was also realised that the increasing number of international opportunities was a potential source of greater pressure on athletes. Mrs Amies, secretary of the WAAA, described the 1956 season as

one of extreme importance in the history of women's athletics, our athletes have had to keep on peak form for a long period, commencing in April and culminating in the Olympic Games in Australia at the end of November. To keep that fitness speaks very highly of the standard of training in this country, for very few athletes broke down under this strain.⁶³

⁶³ Minutes of WAAA AGM, 9 Feb. 1957.

In 1955, athletes in London experienced the most international competition, with additional meetings in July and October at the White City against Prague and Budapest respectively. They were victorious on both occasions, as indeed was the women's team in most of their minor internationals that year. Diane Leather, who broke her own British record for the second time that season when she ran four minutes forty-five seconds for a mile, achieved the most significant performance. The British team won their match against Czechoslovakia in August, and the 3x800 metres relay team of Phyllis Perkins, Nora Smalley and Madeline Wooller beat the British record. September was an even busier month. A small British team travelled to Hungary and several athletes were involved in matches held in Glasgow and Edinburgh, as well as the annual floodlit meeting organised by the AAA at the White City.

Another advantage accorded by these smaller internationals was that a greater number of athletes could be offered a place. Teams for the major games remained relatively small. In 1954, Eight travelled to New Zealand for the Empire Games and nine to the European Championships. In comparison, thirteen athletes competed in a match against France and fifteen in the eastern European tour of that year.⁶⁴ These smaller internationals provided the opportunity for the women's team to show that it was a highly successful force in European athletics. In 1953, they beat their opposition from Germany, the Netherlands and France. The German victory, albeit by a mere two points, was no doubt doubly sweet as this was a mixed match and the British men were beaten 112-94. An additional match against Stockholm was organised for the London athletes in October at the White City. Mixed international competitions, like the Stockholm match, were to become increasingly common during

⁶⁴ WAAA General Committee minutes, 9 Oct. 1954.

the years after the war. Competitions that included both men and women could be viewed as a mixed blessing. On the one hand, matches with the men provided more competition for the women in front of bigger crowds, and may well have contributed to the maintenance of public interest in women's events. On the other hand, the women were rarely provided with more than a few events and were usually restricted to sprinting and the high jump. The small female presence meant their performances were at risk of being over-shadowed, particularly when their events did not count towards the over-all match score. Their achievements received far less space in the press, and this was true in the specialist athletic magazines as well as newspapers. For example, Athletic Weekly's article on the London versus Stockholm match only allocated a single paragraph of a three-page report to the women's events. It was, however, noted that Sheila Lerwill 'captured the imagination of the crowd with her high jumping', suggesting that the spectators did support the few female events.⁶⁵

Despite the increase of international matches, it was still felt that apart from the sprinters, British women lacked the standard of competition they required to succeed at major games. The smaller international events rarely provided strong competition in every event, and the 800 metres in particular was a weak discipline for many nations apart from the Soviet Union. The lack of sufficiently challenging competition was increasingly viewed as a reason for the dominance of the Russian women. Throughout the forties and fifties, both the WAAA and BAAB made requests for race organisers to include a wider range of events for women in their open and handicap programmes. The problems caused by a lack of high quality races were clearly illustrated at the 1954 European Championships. The British women were relatively successful. The Northern Irish athlete, Thelma Hopkins, won the high jump

⁶⁵ Athletics Weekly, 3 Oct. 1953, Vol. 7, No. 40, pp. 4-7.

and Anne Pashley, Pam Seabourne and Shirley Hampton achieved bronze medals in the 100 metres, 80 metre hurdles and 200 metres respectively. Diane Leather won a silver medal in the inaugural women's 800 metres. However, the performance of Leather was judged by the British press to be rather disappointing, although not altogether unexpected. The 800 metre race was described as the most anticipated event in the women's programme, as Leather would be racing the Russian Nina Otkalenko. They had had close battles before and another was imminent here. In the event, however, Otkalenko won relatively easily, with the conclusion being that the British runner was a victim of race inexperience as well as the Russian's 'fluency, speed and determination.'⁶⁶

The implication was clearly that British women, particularly those of world standard, required more competition before major games. International events needed to be sought where the athletes would be faced with opposition that challenged them, and more of the longer races needed to be included in the domestic athletic programme. Too often, the only opportunity women had to compete at the 800 metres was at the area and national championships, with many open meetings preferring to offer only the better supported sprints. At this time, the only real competition for athletes like Leather was at the annual match against the Soviet team. Clearly, one such race a year was insufficient to prepare for a major games. It was not only in the 800 metres that the lack of competition was a problem. The British throwers also required more inspiration, but neither the WAAA nor BAAB responded to the situation. Complaints were still being made in 1960. In that year, Carol Quinton only had three 80 metre hurdle races before the WAAA Championships, which served as the Olympic trials. As Neil Allen reported at the time, 'the most remarkable feature of

⁶⁶ Athletics Weekly, 27 Aug. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 36, pp. 11-17, 11 Sept. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 37, p. 11.

Carole Quinton's silver medal is that she came to the Olympics with hardly any competitive experience.' Surely successful athletes might have performed to an even higher standard if they had a better race programme behind them.⁶⁷

The recognition of longer track events by the IAAF, was the aim of the Women's IAAF Commission when it met in Melbourne, immediately following the 1956 Olympic Games. Several proposals were made in an attempt to further progress within women's athletics. In particular, the commission wanted to recognise the increased number of women competing in 440 yards, 400 metres, 1500 metres and the mile. They asked for these events to be made official IAAF events and the performances added to the federation's record list. The longer distances, however, remained controversial. Several members of the women's commission had to be persuaded to agree that the proposal should be forwarded to the IAAF. There were also doubts expressed about the advisability of including the pentathlon in future Olympic Games, although the request to re-establish the 800 metres was passed with little trouble.

Once the women's commission had agreed their proposals they were recommended to the IAAF, which had the power to decide how women's athletics developed and at what speed. On this occasion, the British representative Mrs Hughes was present at the IAAF meeting. Because of her attempts to persuade delegates to approve the proposals, the shorter distances were accepted on to the official record list from this time, but previous performances were not accepted. This meant that the unofficial world best time, recorded by Britain's Janet Ruff, was not accepted as the first official world record. The proposal by the women's commission to include the

⁶⁷ Olympic Diary Rome 1960. On the spot report of the XVII Olympiad (1960), p.57.

400 metres in the next European Championships was agreed by the IAAF, with the recommendation passed on to the European Commission for final approval.

Progress was not maintained, however, as far as the longer distances were concerned. Both the 1500 metres and mile were rejected. Nearly all the countries present at the IAAF meeting, with the exception of Russia, voted against the proposal. Mrs Hughes reported that somewhat surprisingly, the German representative spoke vigorously against the proposal, which had strengthened general opposition. The main reason given by the representatives for rejecting the longer distances was that there was insufficient competition in countries other than Britain and Russia. More domestic and small international competitions were required to prove that no harm would result from women's involvement in these races. The WAAA supported the inclusion of the longer distances at championships and on to the record lists. The association declared that they would continue to fight for their inclusion despite this setback.

Various national federations prepared reports on the 400 and 800 metres, pentathlon and the mile, and the results were discussed at the 1958 Stockholm meeting of the women's commission. The first women's 400 metres in an IAAF competition was at the 1958 Stockholm European Championships.⁶⁸ The commission decided to propose again that the 400 metres, 800 metres and pentathlon should be staged in the 1960 Olympic Games. While they were not successful in achieving all their aims, one additional event was added to the Olympic programme. Credit should be given to the British WAAA, whose members had studied the existing programme and found space where the new events could be inserted. This enabled the women's

⁶⁸ Daily Mirror, 18 Aug. 1958. Molly Hiscox and Shirley Pirie were given the same time in fourth and fifth place respectively.

commission to successfully challenge the argument that it was impossible to add more events, because the Olympic programme was full. WAAA data was included in the presentation, and the 800 metres was given priority over the pentathlon on the advice of the women's commission. It had previously been decided that if the IAAF would only accept one event for 1960, then the 800 metres would be the preferred choice. As the IAAF did indeed only agree to one event, the 800 metres was accepted back onto the Olympic programme in 1960, while the pentathlon and 400 metres had to wait until the Tokyo Games of 1964.⁶⁹

By the end of the decade, the range of international matches had increased for women athletes. The first international pentathlon was promoted by the BAAB in conjunction with a men's decathlon in 1959. The Netherlands, Britain and Belgium all provided two female athletes. Although the Netherlands won overall, Mary Bignal, a member of London Olympiades Club, won the individual competition.⁷⁰ Towards the end of the year, women's race walking was finally granted its first international competition. Female walkers competed over a mile on the track and three miles on the road, but the discipline has been described by Beryl Randle, who was the leading competitor in this period, as 'the Cinderella of the sport'. Throughout the fifties, Randle successfully won both road and track titles. Her most successful season was

⁶⁹ Report of the Women's International Athletic Federation, held in Melbourne, Australia, Dec. 1956. Minutes from The Twentieth Congress of The IAAF, 3-4 Dec. 1956. Letter from Mrs Z. Romanova, president of the Women's Commission of the IAAF, to Mrs Amies, WAAA Delegate. Report from Mrs Marea Hartman on the Women's Commission of the IAAF, Stockholm, 16 Aug. 1958. All held in WAAA files.

⁷⁰ The other British representative was Miss J. Adamson from Pheonix LAC. She came fifth.

1954, when she broke the British mile record four times.⁷¹ However, there were no opportunities to represent her country, a fact that she found very frustrating. Consequently, although she had retired from competition, when she heard that there was finally to be an international she resumed training. Her decision illustrates what a powerful motivating factor international competition could be.

The trial for the international match was held on the Tyburn Road in the West Midlands, on 22 August 1959. Beryl Randle won and was therefore successful in gaining a place, along with fellow Birchfield LAC athlete Betty Franklin, Helen Vincent from London Olympiades AC and Nelly Loins from Small Heath. The international was a three mile road walk held in Copenhagen on Sunday 27 September 1959. British athletes placed first and second, demonstrating their strength in this discipline. Unfortunately, this race did not herald the beginning of a regular programme of international walking competitions for women. Mrs Randle, now a member of the Race Walking Commission, explained that a lack of money meant that after this match the women were restricted to 'postal internationals'. These were organised along the same lines as the telegraphic meets held in the United States during the 1920s. The walkers participated over a set distance in countries such as Britain, Denmark and Switzerland, and then sent the results to each other. These were compared to see who was the fastest. As Beryl Randle said, it was a very sad situation.⁷²

⁷¹ It should be noted that one of those records was not recognised, as the time was achieved in a handicap race. There was also some doubt about whether there were the correct number of qualified timekeepers present.

⁷² Interview with Mrs Beryl Randle, 28 Mar. 1996. Small Heath Harriers was situated near Birmingham. It is now part of the Solihull and Small Heath Club.

By 1960, the rest of the track and field programme, for which there was apparently enough money to support regular internationals, was continuing to expand. Matches were held between Britain and Germany, Poland, the USSR and Finland. Women's events were also included in the London versus Stockholm meeting and at an event in Helsinki. The British women were victorious with the exception of the match against the USSR. It was also in this period that the practice of inviting individuals or small groups of athletes to international matches on the continent was established. These were not representative matches but were the forerunners of today's grand prix events.

Although, as we have seen, women's athletics was undoubtedly gaining popularity throughout the fifties, it would be wrong to assume that all opposition was declining. In 1953, IOC president Avery Brundage illustrated the potential seriousness of the threat to women's elite sport. He proposed that the abolition of female competition was the only rational way of reducing the Olympic programme. Support for his motion was not universal, and the issue was debated over several weeks in World Sports. Eliminating all women's events was one of eight suggestions he made in order to reduce the size of the programme, and shorten the duration of the Games to sixteen days. Women could have a separate games, he argued, as they had in what he called 'ancient times'. By this, he presumably did not mean 1934 when the last Women's World Games was staged.⁷³

⁷³ 'Should We Prune The Games?' Apr. 1958, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 5 – 7. Extracts from a letter written by Avery Brundage to all national Olympic committees and international federations. The other seven proposals were: 1. To eliminate some of the optional sports entirely, 2. To transfer some sports to the Winter Games. 3. To eliminate all team sports. 4. To use Regional Games elimination events for the Olympic Games. 5. To hold trials in various sections of the world before the Olympic

Replies to this letter were sent to the editor at World Sports at the request of Brundage who received all suggestions before the matter was debated at the IOC meeting in Mexico City on 14 April. The president of Denmark's sports federation, Mr Loe Frederiksen, rejected the proposal to omit women. He argued that this 'would be detrimental to women's sport (and) that they are on the official programme to stay.' Britain's Lord Aberdare, an IOC member since 1929 agreed, and wrote that women's events had 'added interest and merit to the Games'. Abolishing their competitions now, when the Olympics had been established as their world championships, would be unfair and create resentment. The general secretary of the South African and British Empire Games Association, Mr Ira G. Emery, and Mr Karel Lotsy of the Netherlands's Olympic Committee were similarly against the withdrawal of female events. However, Lotsy did not support any further expansion of the women's programme. In addition to the official representatives, several individuals outlined their views. Only one reply questioned why women should compete at all, but some others did support a separate championship to be held in April or May. This could then have included 800 metres and a hockey tournament.⁷⁴

Harold Abrahams, who pointed out that the suggestion of eliminating women would not significantly reduce the numbers of competitors, summed up the arguments. A separate championship would simply create new financial and organisational burdens for national and international federations, as had been experienced in the twenties and thirties. Abrahams concluded that women had earned their place in the games and should be supported by the IOC:

When one considers the splendid part that women have played in the lives of nations in peace and war and in almost every sphere of life,

Games begin. 6. To impose standards in each sport which entrants must meet. 7. To reduce the number of entrants in all individual events.

⁷⁴ 'Pruning the Olympics?', World Sports, Apr. 1953, Vol. 19, No. 4, pp. 6-7.

surely to exclude them from the Olympic Games (apparently because the Greeks did so over 2,000 years ago) is to propose a deprivation of something which may be regarded as a right fully earned.⁷⁵

When the IOC discussed the matter in April, women's events gained the necessary support to be retained. The editor of World Sports confirmed this decision when he reported that

as a matter of principle, it was decided that women's events should *not* be eliminated - a decision which will meet with whole-hearted approval from the great majority of *World Sports* readers, judging from their numerous letters.⁷⁶

The matter, although officially resolved at this meeting, was not agreed by all IOC representatives. Consequently, the place of women in the Olympic Games was questioned on several more occasions during the fifties. The French member of the IOC, Monsieur Francois Pietri, repeated the arguments in 1957 and proposed that eliminating women's events would be a more logical and acceptable solution to abolishing some team competitions. He argued that because women could not produce the same times or distances as their male counterparts, they were not worthy of a separate competition. Pietri failed to accept that anyone had much interest in the

⁷⁵ 'Pruning the Olympics?' Harold Abrahams Sums Up', World Sports, May 1953, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 5-7. The other sports that had female participants were: swimming with 161 women from twenty-eight countries, fencing with thirty-six women from fourteen countries and canoeing with seventeen women from thirteen countries.

⁷⁶ 'Carry On, Melbourne', Jun. 1953, Vol. 19, No. 6, p. 5.

women's events, and argued that excluding them would not adversely effect the games financially, or omit any of the glamour associated with them.

The main theme of Pietri's argument was that there was no justification for having separate competitions for women. If they wanted to participate in the Olympic Games, then they should have to be selected on merit as being better than their country's male athletes were. This proposal, which he had suggested first at the Vienna Session and then again at the IOC Helsinki Congress of 1956, was not welcomed by some of his colleagues, particularly those representing the largest two Olympic sports, athletics and swimming. Pietri dismissed opposition as a 'vague notion of chivalry', as well as the fear by the other federations that athletics and swimming would disagree with any moves to implement his motion. The French representative, in a similar way to his countryman de Coubertin, felt women's sport had no place in the Olympic arena. He compared the winning performances by male and female competitors at Helsinki, and then concluded that as far as athletics was concerned no woman would have survived the men's preliminary heats. To support his views he drew on the work of Mr Jean Paulham, who had written that no woman could better the performance of an average male athlete.

Such claims ignored the fact that internationally ranked females could now achieve better performances than the majority of domestically ranked male athletes. In addition, while it was not suggested that female world-class athletes were capable of the same performances as their male counterparts, official Olympic reports from all the Games after the Second World War emphasised the interest displayed by the public in the women's events. Pietri produced no evidence, except his own personal opinion, to claim that 'the women's contests are of no interest to anybody.' He finally proposed that the federations should organise a separate games for women in order to 'encourage the taste for sports among women', and patronisingly suggested that if they participated in a general games alongside men, 'one could contemplate the separate listing of women'. The most successful females could be given 'an award or medal'. Pietri justified his proposals by reminding readers that rather than considering

what was best for women, or even what they themselves wanted, it was more important to enable the Olympic Games to continue in its established format:

Our only object here is to point out that, for imperative reasons of saving time and reducing the timetable, the Olympic Programme should be reserved solely for the men's events or better still for mixed competitions open to men and women ... At any rate we would be spared the boring performances consisting of 50 or 60 women competing among themselves in order to obtain insignificant scores!⁷⁷

This article not only illustrates Pietri's individual dislike of sportswomen, but also reflects the struggle that the women's associations faced to persuade the exclusively male IOC to support the expansion of women's events. No woman had access to any decision-making position, the men governing the Olympic programme were from elite, privileged backgrounds, and their views on women both in sport and within society as a whole were largely traditional. There was little chance of significantly expanding the women's programme, however, in a period when their supporters were still having to defend their right to be involved at all.

Women's sport was still considered by the international governing bodies to be far less important than that of men. Jack Crump had discussed this point in 1956. He implied that from the time that the IAAF succeeded in persuading the FSFI to assimilate into the Olympic Games the IOC had not treated women's sport well. Referring to the lack of support by the United States, Crump said

there is also, the fact that some of the most influential countries have not yet developed women's athletics to any real extent. Surprising how

⁷⁷ F. Pietri, 'Women's Sports in the Olympic Games', Bulletin du Comité International Olympique, 58 (Lausanne 15 May 1957), p.63.

disinterested you can be in supporting progress if it holds out no obvious advantage for you!

But here's an eleventh-hour plea to the congress: remember that when the overall government of women's athletics was taken over by the IAAF, the bait offered to the separate women's athletic organisation was inclusion in the Olympics. Consider how well - or badly - that promise has been interpreted ...

You see the struggle for more women's events, waged in the IAAF committee room in Melbourne this December, is really a continuance of the fight which has gone on ever since female athletics began. If cuts in the Games entries have to be made, so be it - but not please at the expense of the women, who have shown remarkable patience, forbearance and co-operation in the last 30 years.⁷⁸

While support for women's events had undoubtedly grown from both the medical establishment and within athletics itself, the truth remained that their place in the sport was still secondary to men. This was clearly illustrated in the debates on how to streamline the Olympic programme. Any expansion of the number of women's events had to be discussed in relation to the over-riding concern of the governing bodies to save money and time. With the exceptions of the walking events, there was little agreement that men's individual events should be omitted from the programme, or that their team events had no place in an Olympiad. Instead, women's achievements continued to be dismissed as not worthy of Olympic status by some IOC members, and the threat of exclusion remained. While the participation of female athletes was not recognised on a par with men's, it was unlikely that women would

⁷⁸ 'Jack Crump's Gossip', World Sports, Dec. 1956, pp. 18-19.

enjoy greater Olympic opportunities. The inclusion of the 800 metres in 1960 was therefore achieved against the odds, rather than being the inevitable development that one would reasonably expect.

As we saw earlier, the IOC had belatedly agreed to accept the reintroduction of the 800 metres into their women's programme after a gap of thirty-two years and five Olympiads. Britain was represented in what was described as 'the gruelling 800m gallop' by 'three high-speed housewives, Joy Jordan, Diane Leather-Charles and Phyllis Perkins'.⁷⁹ The progress made by female distance runners, including housewives, was clear to see with twenty-five of the twenty-seven competitors beating the Olympic record of 2 minutes 16.8 seconds.⁸⁰ The world record that had been set just prior to the Games was 2 minutes 4.3 seconds, and the same Russian athlete, Lyudmila Shevtsova-Linsenko, equalled this in Rome. However, the Soviet Union did not dominate the event, as contrary to expectations the winner was their only athlete to reach the final. Australia's Brenda Jones made it a very competitive race, finishing second in 2 minutes 4.4 seconds. She had taken over the challenge once her compatriot, Dixie Willis, 'staggered off the track along the finishing straight.' Of the three British representatives, only Mrs Jordan succeeded in gaining a place in the final, where she finished below her best in sixth. Both Mrs Diane Charles, who as Diane Leather had dominated British half-mile and mile racing in the 1950s, and Mrs Phyllis Perkins failed to do themselves justice. This was particularly ironic for Mrs Charles who had been in her best form during the years that the distance was omitted from the Games.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Daily Express, 6 Sept. 1960, p. 16.

⁸⁰ For example, in 1958 Diane Leather set a British record of 2 minutes 6.6 seconds. This was on the occasion that she was second at the European Championships.

⁸¹ The British Olympic Association Official Report of The Olympic Games 1960, p. 41 and p. 44. Joy Jordan set a new world record for 880 yards after the close of this championship.

Coverage of the 800 metres was similar to that after the infamous 1928 race. Again, some newspaper reporters attacked the fact that women were competing over this distance. While their predecessors had been supportive of the event in 1928, both Peter Wilson of the Daily Mirror and Desmond Hacket of the Daily Express questioned the place of the 800 metres in the women's athletic programme. Britain's men did not have a successful games, a result that was blamed by Gordon Pirie, among others, on the fact that the team had been taken out too late to acclimatise to the extreme heat.⁸² This was not taken into account in the women's 800 metres, however, and was not considered as a possible reason why Dixie Willis, who was in the lead until fifty yards to go, was unable to finish. Britain's Joy Jordan was described as finishing 'pale and stumbling', and second placed Brenda Jones as 'grey-faced'. Dehydration, however, was never considered by reporters, who were quick to argue that the '800m endurance test must be struck off the Olympic programme again. It is too strenuous for girls!' ⁸³:

I think it's a great pity that this event, which was once run before - in the 1928 Games - has been revived. I cannot believe that anyone really enjoys seeing women punished like this. Certainly, there is no grace or beauty about women under this sort of strain.⁸⁴

Clearly, in the opinion of these sportswriters, women who competed in the longer distances were unfeminine and unattractive. Consideration was not given to what the athletes might want to do themselves, nor was there any acknowledgement that the weather may well have affected the female athletes as it had the men. There had been an increasing amount of evidence over the last few years that competing

⁸² 'The Moment of Appalling Truth', Daily Mirror, 5 Sept. 1960, Daily Express, 1 Sept. 1960,

⁸³ Daily Express, 6 Sept. 1960.

⁸⁴ 'Women's 800, Grey-Faced', Daily Mirror, 8. Sept. 1960.

over 800 metres did not harm women, including two championship races at the 1954 and 1958 European Championships. Nevertheless, newspaper reporters who were in a position to influence the public had either forgotten or chosen to ignore the fact that athletes like Britain's Diane Leather, Betty Loakes, Joy Jordan and Phyllis Perkins, to name only the best, had successfully competed over this distance. Not all reports of the Rome 800 metres were negative, however. Neil Allen wrote that

In today's exciting final an Australian girl, Dixie Willis, staggered off the track with only 50 yards to go and then returned to finish before being announced as 'did not finish', but I do not anticipate that this misjudgement by a strong but inexperienced girl will lead to a second suspension of the 800 metres.⁸⁵

The Relationship between the British Men and Women's Associations

The acceptance of women athletes may have been slow within the international governing bodies, but there is evidence that closer relationships between the men and women in Britain did emerge after the Second World War. Relationships between the men and women's athletic associations were not always harmonious. Although many men had been supportive before the war, others continued to hold the view that women had no place in *their* championships and it was the male athletes who were recognised as the *real* team. Although this attitude did not entirely disappear after the war, the situation did begin to improve during the 1940s, not only in press reports but also within the hierarchy of British athletic administration. By the fifties, many of the internationals catered for both men and women, although the competitions were not always held at the same venue. When Britain travelled to Germany in 1953, for example, the women competed in Nuremburg and the men in

⁸⁵ Olympic Diary Rome 1960, p. 89.

the Berlin Olympic Stadium. By 1955, when the return match was held in London, both teams competed at the White City on the same days. It continued to be the accepted practice, however, that the male and female competitions were considered separate matches.⁸⁶

The WAAA had finally succeeded in gaining some direct representation within the decision-making committees of British athletics. When the representatives of the men and women worked together, a greater degree of understanding began to emerge. The WAAA General Committee viewed their place on the British Amateur Athletic Board (BAAB) as being highly symbolic. As we have seen a few years before the Second World War, the WAAA had been forced to agree to be represented by the BAAB in international matters. In 1937, following the decision that the IAAF rather than the FSFI should control women's international athletics, the Board began to represent female athletes. The incorporation of the WAAA into the BAAB, alongside the AAA, probably did improve communication between the two distinct associations after the war.⁸⁷ Additional seats were gained on committees in the forties, and from 1947 the honorary treasurer and secretary of the WAAA represented the women's association at BOA meetings.⁸⁸ The WAAA interpreted the decisions as a clear indication of acceptance.

The relationships between the AAA and women's associations did improve once athletics resumed international activity after the war. The increased number of mixed matches increased awareness of the positive aspects of women's athletics and helped to change opinions that the sport was not suited to females. The female athletes who competed at the 1946 European Championships considered that their inclusion had persuaded Harold Abrahams that they had a place in the sport. Jack

⁸⁶ 'Jack Crump's Gossip', World Sports, Jul. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 7, p. 32.

⁸⁷ P. Lovesey, The Official Centenary History of the AAA Amateur Athletic Association (Enfield 1979), p. 67.

⁸⁸ Minutes of WAAA committee meeting, 1 Feb. 1947.

Crump argued that the women's team was now regarded just as highly as the men were. This was rather over-stating the facts, but while there were undoubtedly examples of negative attitudes during the fifties, the status of female athletes did improve after Oslo.⁸⁹

Although the 1946 European Championships did not witness an increase in the events available for women, it was probably more important that by the close of the championships the female athletes were judged to be full members of a combined British team. Co-operation between the men's and women's organisations was recognised as being the best it had ever been at an international competition. This was the first European Championships where the men and women competed together, and the women's presence in Oslo was praised by many of the male officials. The WAAA chairman Mr Taylor, noted that the women had been recognised 'as part of England's team in Oslo and that their behaviour and performances improved relations with their male counterparts.'⁹⁰ Harold Abrahams illustrated the mellowing of some of the older male athletes' views when he said that although he

never been considered much in favour of women's athletics ... I want to say without reservation that the spirit of our small women's team was something which aroused even my admiration. They were a splendid example of what the team spirit should be.⁹¹

The separate nature of the two teams, which had been an enduring feature of pre-war championships, was maintained as much by the WAAA as the male governing bodies. The women's association was determined that no hint of scandal should attach itself to the team, as it might subsequently be used to support calls for

⁸⁹ Crump, Running Round the World, p. 87.

⁹⁰ WAAA committee minutes, Mar. 1947.

⁹¹ Athletics, Oct. 1946, Vol. 2, No. 11, p. 10.

their exclusion. In addition, the women's team always included teenage athletes, so it was important that parents were reassured that there was no possibility of impropriety. The correct image was essential in order to maintain support for what was still an emerging sport.

Male officials expressed further positive comments about the women's team after the European Championships at Brussels in 1950. Altogether, the women won seven medals out of the seventeen gained by the combined British team. The two flat sprints and the 80 metre hurdles revealed the improving depth that was now present within the women's team. All three representatives qualified for the final in the 100 metres, an event in which the darling of the British press at this time, sixteen-year-old June Foulds, placed third behind the star of the championships Fanny Blankers-Koen.

A further bronze for Britain was gained in the 200 metres, courtesy of Dorothy Hall. This race took a similar pattern to that of the shorter sprint, with the athletes behind Fanny Blankers-Koen (24.0 seconds) all performing very similar times. The Soviet athlete, Setchenov, gained her second silver in 24.8 seconds, while Hall, the USSR's Malshina and Holland's Brower were all timed at 25.0 seconds. Blankers-Koen's performance underlined her remarkable strength, as she had already added the 80 metres hurdles gold to her 100 metres victory before she tackled the 200 metres. In the hurdles she was again a clear winner, this time leaving Maureen Dyson to fight for silver. As Maureen Gardner, the British athlete had pushed Fanny Blankers-Koen all the way to the line in the 1948 Olympic Games, but here the Dutch athlete was in a class of her own. Nevertheless, Dyson was judged to have competed successfully, this being her comeback season after her marriage to the national coach Geoff Dyson.⁹²

Three additional medals were secured for Britain in the women's high jump and the 4x100 metres relay. The high jump, another event where competition was fierce, was eventually a triumph for Sheila Alexander, who beat Dorothy Tyler into

⁹² *Athletics Weekly*, 2 Sept. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 35, p. 10.

the silver position.⁹³ Britain's third representative, Betty Crowther, who had already won a silver medal in the pentathlon, finished fifth. The relay teams were involved in yet another close finish, resulting in the photo-finish having to be consulted just as it was after the women's 100 metres final. This time the British quartet was judged to have held off Fanny Blankers-Koen, who crossed the line with June Foulds. The Russian team, which had been involved in the battle for first place, was relegated to third. The first three teams were all faster than the winning time at Wembley, with the first two teams recording the same time. Clearly both the depth and standard of women's athletics had improved significantly since the Olympic Games, a sign perhaps that athletics was appealing to more women and that they were training more seriously. The positive performances achieved by the women helped considerably in their struggle to gain further acceptance. At the end of the championships the British team manager Jack Crump, who had spoken so positively about them after the 1946 championships, wrote that

these titles were won by the complete team - integration of the 33 men and 14 women who made up the British party. Everyone of them gave as a team and all of them share in the honours.⁹⁴

Individual members of the WAAA should be recognised as helping to improve the status of the association amongst male team officials. In 1952, Marea Hartman travelled to the Melbourne Olympic Games at the expense of her employers Bowaters Limited, in order that she could assist Jack Crump in his administrative duties as team manager. In Running Round the World, Crump specifically mentions her support. The hard work and support offered by Mary Amies, WAAA honorary

⁹³ Both Sheila Alexander and Dorothy Tyler cleared 1.63 metres but failed 1.65, as did the third placed athlete Ganeker.

⁹⁴ Daily Express, 29 Aug. 1950.

secretary and assistant team manager at Melbourne, was also singled out for praise. On several occasions in the forties and fifties, it was noted what a tremendous team spirit the women's team enjoyed. Male officials regarded this as evidence that the women's side of the sport was in some ways healthier than the men's.⁹⁵

During a period when the WAAA was frequently criticised for being unprofessional, suffering from poor organisational skills and letting their athletes down, praise was very welcome. At the European Championships of 1954, AAA and BAAB officials praised both Marea Hartman and Mrs Leslie, who travelled as team manager and physiotherapist respectively. The male and female team managers were reported to have worked well together, and all members of the team management received a letter of thanks from the BAAB.⁹⁶

There were several indications that during this time, both the women's governing body and sportswomen themselves were finally being recognised as having a part to play in Britain's athletic future. Nevertheless, one should be careful not to assume that all areas of disagreement had been resolved. Some discrimination remained, not least the idea that men were the experts and should therefore maintain the positions of power in the areas of officiating and judging. Since the decline of the Women's World Games in 1934, international female athletics had been completely assimilated into the male championships. The English women had repeatedly expressed concern that their officials should be able to represent Great Britain at the major games. Their demands met stiff opposition, however, as illustrated in the case of the 1948 London Olympic Games. The WAAA submitted two officials for both the track and the field events, but the AAA objected, claiming it caused too many difficulties if women tried to work with the men's teams.

Ten years later, members of the WAAA were still unhappy with the men's association. In 1958, Mrs Curson was appointed as team manager by the WAAA for

⁹⁵ Crump, *Running Round The World*, pp. 167-178.

⁹⁶ Team manager's report, WAAA AGM minutes, 29 Jan. 1955.

the English versus Finland match. In the programme, she was listed as a Competitor's Steward, but was unable to fulfil either duty. She was instructed to hand out the travelling expenses to the female athletes, while male officials carried out the role of Competitor's Steward. She complained that in

this unorganised manner, use was made of my experience whilst refusing to me the full honour of the appointment. If this attitude is typical of the Amateur Athletic Association's administration, I consider the women's sport would benefit by a full and impartial investigation into the apparent indifference towards the officials of the organisation I represent.⁹⁷

It would appear that women officials were accepted when they remained in the separate world of female athletics, but they had no place in the men's sphere of the sport. When male athletes were involved, only male officials were considered to be of a high enough standard.

There were few controversial matters arising between athletes and officials during the period of 1945 to 1960. However, as the officials began to get significantly older than the athletes they were representing, conflicts did begin to emerge. When the International Athletes Committee was established on 19 October 1958, it was quickly revealed that any emerging problems were not confined to the women's

⁹⁷ BAAB Report, 16-17 May 1947. See also, a copy of a letter sent to Mrs Amies from C. Curson in 1958. Both are contained in the WAAA files. The England versus Finland match referred to in the text was held on 26-27 Sept. 1958.

team.⁹⁸ The committee was established after the Melbourne Olympic Games, where some athletes had expressed their unhappiness that many nations had paid their athletes 'pocket money'. Although this was against contemporary IAAF rules, many officials were anticipating a relaxation by the governing body. The British team management, upholding 'true amateurism' until the last, chose not to provide the same financial assistance to their team. They did agree, however, to pay for stationary, stamps, and necessary laundry bills. Diane Leather, who was present at Melbourne, does not recall any problems between athletes and officials, suggesting that male members of the team led the complaints. She commented that 'I do not remember any significant confrontations during the time I was competing.' In a further example of the men and women working together, the AAA, WAAA and BAAB were all represented on the International Athletes Committee.⁹⁹

The need for such a committee had been previously illustrated by what was probably the most serious conflict between female athletes and the WAAA. This occurred during the Empire Games of 1950, held in New Zealand. As limited resources were available to finance the team, the BAAB allocated the WAAA only seven places. Following the precedent set at the Olympics of 1934, the women's selection committee decided to fill these entirely with athletes, choosing not to send an official. However, Mrs Taylor, a member of the NCWAAA and wife of Richard Taylor who was the WAAA chairman, offered to pay her own expenses and consequently acted as team manager for the women's team. This was a decision that

⁹⁸ An earlier example of conflict between the male athletes and the team management was reported after the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Athletes reported they were unhappy with the quality of team management, the fact that the team arrived too late, and the unhelpful masseurs. AAA minutes, 4 Nov. 1936.

⁹⁹ Personal correspondence with Diane Charles, Jul. 1996. See also Lovesey, The Official Centenary History, p. 114, and Crump, Running Round The World, p. 172.

was to subsequently result in considerable unhappiness for individual members of the team, and significant embarrassment for the association itself.

In addition to the period of competition, the boat journey took six weeks each way, meaning that the team was away from home for some considerable time. While the press did not record any problems during the trip, attention increased once it was reported that Sylvia Cheeseman, current British champion over 100 and 200 metres, and Doris Batter, British 60 metres champion, had been banned from English teams for a year. The Daily Graphic noted that Sylvia Cheeseman had employed a solicitor and, together with the Daily Express, gave the story front-page coverage. A large photo was printed of the two athletes playing the piano, looking very feminine and innocent. It was alleged that the women had not been 'amenable to discipline'. They denied this, arguing instead that Mrs Taylor's brand of discipline was unnecessarily harsh. They felt that because they were the only women on the ship who were not married or engaged, this had meant they were treated differently by Mrs Taylor and blamed whenever there was any trouble. The women's curfew was set for ten-thirty, and the two athletes asserted that they had kept to this as well as attending the early morning keep fit classes. The age difference between the athletes and team manager was emphasized in both newspaper reports. Cheeseman was reported as confirming that in her view, the different opinions held by the two generations were indeed the root of the problem. She pointed out that 'some of the General Committee members are non-athletes. Others are old and have forgotten their young days.'¹⁰⁰

Although Mrs Taylor was appointed as team manager, the role was still seen by the WAAA as including chaperoning duties. Mrs Taylor clearly felt this was her role, and differences arose over her demands for girls to ask for permission before they joined in any entertainment during the trip. One particular cause of disagreement, according to the two athletes, was the fact that the men and women mixed. Both girls had boyfriends on the ship, a fact that was disliked by their team

¹⁰⁰ Daily Graphic, 13 Jul. 1950, and Daily Express, 13 Jul. 1950.

manager. Further conflict resulted from her reported dislike of female athletes sitting alongside male team members to eat. The expectations of how women of this age should act differed significantly between the athletes and Mrs Taylor, who it must be said was determined to 'protect' her athletes. This was surely a hangover from the early days of female competition, when the WAAA was dedicated to making sure no hint of disreputable behaviour could be alleged. The fact that many of the early members of the WAAA remained in control of the teams and organisation, was obviously beginning to cause some problems as far as their relationship with the new generation of athletes was concerned.

When the athlete's appeal against suspension was held in July, additional front-page coverage was provided by the News of the World.¹⁰¹ The BAAB tribunal cleared the two young women of all the charges, none of which were considered serious. In addition, the members of the tribunal - chairman Harold Abrahams, Mr E. Clynes, Mr J. Crump and Mr W. Stringer - criticised the WAAA for their earlier decision to suspend the athletes. They concluded that there was no evidence of behaviour which could be described as 'reprehensible or of an improper nature'. Furthermore, the women's association was accused of ignoring basic rules of justice by using 'uncorroborated and unchallenged evidence'. The tribunal concluded that

It is much to be regretted that a responsible governing body thought fit to come to such a serious decision without any attempt to obtain a clear and impartial view of the facts, and we have little doubt that had the General Committee of the WAAA conducted a hearing in the normal way they would never have reached the decision they did.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ News of the World, 30 Jul. 1950.

¹⁰² Athletics Weekly, 5 Aug. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 31, p. 3.

Mrs Taylor was felt to have taken her duties too seriously in expecting to be consulted as much as she did. However, the athletes were not viewed as entirely blameless. Just before the tribunal's decision, the editor of Athletics Weekly wrote that

there is no doubt whatever that the Empire Games trip was treated by many of the girls as a joy-ride, but the handling of the matter by the WAAA simply invited criticism.¹⁰³

The News of the World provided a different explanation for why the female athletes had clashed with Mrs Taylor, and concluded that

athletes, particularly high-class performers, and especially if they are young and feminine, are notably highly strung, temperamental, not a little difficult and sometimes irresponsible.¹⁰⁴

The championship itself was not marred by controversy. Forty thousand spectators watched the athletes compete at Eden Park in Auckland. The crowd was rewarded with a tremendous display by the Australian women sprinters, particularly Marjorie Jackson, known as "The Lithgow Flash". She equalled the world record of 10.8 seconds in both the opening heat of the 100 yards and again in the final. Despite the inharmonious time spent travelling to the event, Sylvia Cheeseman ran 10.9 seconds in her heat, to finish just behind Australia's other sprinter Shirley Strickland. Both of them ran faster than the previous Empire Games record. While the English athlete did not display this form in later rounds, Britain did secure both gold and silver in the high jump, courtesy of Dorothy Tyler and Betty Crowther respectively.

¹⁰³ Athletics Weekly, 24 Jun 1950, Vol. 4, No. 25, p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ News of the World, 30 Jul. 1950.

For the first time, Tyler was selected by the WAAA to compete in more than one event. She made the most of the opportunity, participating in the 80 metres hurdles, javelin and long jump. The relay teams also won medals. They gained a bronze in the 440 yards and silver in the 660 yard event. On both occasions, the Australian sprinters underlined their superiority by winning in a new Empire Games record.¹⁰⁵

Accommodation and Conditions at International Competition

The resurrection of the Olympic Games in 1948 was the highlight of the immediate post-war years for the athletic world. The IOC had previously awarded the 1944 Games to London, and this city hosted the 1948 meeting despite still recovering from six years of war. The decision to award the Olympiad to London was not taken by the IOC until 1946. The combination of material shortages, and the lack of time that the BOA had to organise the event, meant that government help was essential. Traditionally, British sport had prided itself on its separation from the state. However, in a period when there was a great need for American dollars, the government was urged by the foreign secretary Ernest Bevin, that hosting the Olympics would attract tourists and help the country in its recovery. This, together with the honour of staging a premier international sporting festival, appears to have persuaded the Cabinet to support the Games.¹⁰⁶

Clothing coupons for the athletes and officials was a primary concern of the WAAA, who were required to supply enough for team uniforms. The BOA and the official organising committee were responsible for the athlete's kit and for some of the official's clothes, but the WAAA agreed to provide coupons for shoes, underslips and extra dresses. It was hoped that the athletes would be able to provide their own white shoes and stockings. According to the WAAA committee minutes, the female

¹⁰⁵ 'The British Empire Games', *Athletics Weekly*, 18 Feb. 1950. Vol. 4, No. 8, pp. 6-11.

¹⁰⁶ T. Mason, 'The London Olympics of 1948', unpublished paper, 1996.

athletes preferred to make their own competition shorts and vest, and consequently were presented with material to do this. It is also worth noting that women were not confined to the role of athletes at the 1948 Olympiad. In addition to competing, they were involved in the organisation of the Olympics itself. The British Women's Voluntary Services staffed the athlete's accommodation and carried out the catering arrangements. They guided people to where they were staying once they arrived in London, and altogether over 5,000 local people housed visitors in their own homes.

The shortage of materials meant that building an Olympic Village was not possible. Accommodation for the majority of male athletes was provided in the Royal Airforce camps at Uxbridge and West Drayton and at the ex-military camp at Richmond Park. The remaining few were housed in Middlesex County Schools. All the female athletes were placed in privately owned establishments.¹⁰⁷ The British women were accommodated at a college, along with several other female teams. According to Sylvia Cheeseman, who competed in the 100 metres, it did not compare favourably with the men's accommodation at Richmond Park:

(we stayed) right near the red light areas, it was dreadful. I remember seeing a couple of Norwegian girls being pursued and fending off men, and I remember thinking what a stupid thing to do (to put us there). And the whole idea was you didn't like to put the men athletes near the female athletes. I think they'd have been much safer near the men athletes! Some of the buses, the Victoria coaches, were right outside.

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of WAAA International Sub-Committee, 24 Apr. 1948. 'The XIVth Olympiad, Official Report of the Organising Committee', records that 150 women stayed at Southland's College, Wimbledon. In addition, St. Helen's School in Northwood was also open from 24 July to 20 August and catered for 120 women. Between 26 July and 20 August, 120 women used the National Training College of Domestic Science. All three establishments had one dining room and one kitchen. See also The Times, 24 Aug. 1948.

(They) started up at five o'clock in the morning ... it was a totally unsuitable place, right in the middle of London.¹⁰⁸

At the 1946 European Championships, both the men and women had stayed in disused army camps, sleeping on straw beds and washing in cold rainwater. The accommodation in London, therefore, represented an improvement in conditions and illustrated the availability of better lodgings as Europe began to recover from the war. At the 1954 Empire and Commonwealth Games held in Vancouver, Canada, the organisers maintained the tradition of separating the men and women's teams. The men stayed in the athletes' village, while the women were accommodated three miles away in the new women's residences of a local university. This provided an excellent base with only two athletes sharing a room.

Whether this had an effect on the athlete's performances was not recorded, but despite what was described as 'keen' competition, the British women won six medals: three silvers and three bronzes. Dorothy Tyler's second place in the high jump was particularly noteworthy, as she spent the first eight days of the trip in hospital with dysentery. There was also a welcome silver in the discus from Suzanne Allday. Jean Desforges won a bronze medal in both the long jump and 80 metre hurdles, as did Shirley Hampton in the 220 yards. On both occasions, Jean was credited with the same performance as the second placed athlete but was judged to have finished third. The relay team was also unlucky, being narrowly beaten by Australia who remained the dominant sprint quartet. The British team led until the final stage when the 100 metre gold medallist, Marjorie Jackson, overhauled Anne Pashley to snatch victory.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Sylvia Disley (née Cheeseman), 19. Jul. 1995.

¹⁰⁹ Team manager's official report, WAAA AGM minutes, 29 Jan. 1955. Information was also drawn from an interview with Dorothy Tyler, 16 Jan. 1981, held in the National Centre for Athletics

Almost immediately after returning from Vancouver, the team selected for the European Championships set out for Berne in Switzerland. Sponsorship had been secured from British European Airways, which not only provided the travel but also presented the team with cigarettes on the return journey! Although this does not mean that all the team were smokers, this gesture of goodwill reveals how the attitudes of sportsmen and women, as well as society in general have altered. While a few athletes do smoke in the 1990s, they are certainly in the minority, and sponsorship by cigarette companies is a very controversial subject. Conditions in Switzerland were again of a high standard, especially at the Federal Sports Centre at Macolin, high up in the mountains. The teams were separated as usual, although they were situated near to each other and ate together in a main building. The men stayed in an athletes village, while the women were housed in accommodation a further five hundred feet up. Further sponsorship had been gained from Horlicks, Lucozade, Ovaltine, and Rybena, and these products were sent out from England. The athletes had use of a gymnasium, two preparation tracks and a swimming pool, but travelling to the competition venue did cause problems. Fortunately, this was sometimes alleviated on competition days by 'interested friends' driving athletes and officials to the track.¹¹⁰

The Melbourne Olympic Games of 1956 was the first Olympics in which both the men and women's teams were housed together. The team stayed in bungalows and houses within an athletic village. The accommodation was good, but the women athletes do not seem to have been as well catered for as their male counterparts. There was an increasing need for a physiotherapist to be responsible for the women's team. According to subsequent reports on the Games, the one physiotherapist who accompanied the athletes was primarily for the benefit of the men. This was also the

Literature, Birmingham University. This records that she had dysentery. Details were also taken from L. Robinson's interview with Sylvia Disley.

¹¹⁰ *Athletics Weekly*, 28 Aug. 1954, p. 3. In addition, refer to the team manager's report that is included in the minutes of the WAAA AGM, 29 Jan. 1955.

case when an assistant arrived. Marea Hartman, who had travelled to the championships independently,¹¹¹ was eventually able to solve the problem. She was staying with a doctor in Australia, and he managed to find a qualified physiotherapist who was willing to work on the female athletes voluntarily during the Games. Clearly not all problems regarding differing resources and facilities for the men and women had been resolved.

While Switzerland, in particular, provided the athletes with modern facilities of an excellent standard, such luxuries were not available on all occasions. The conditions were not always what one might expect for international competition and were certainly not up to today's standards. In 1955, when the British women travelled to Bordeaux for a match against France, all twenty-two members of the team slept in one dormitory. There were no showers, and the sinks that were available had neither plugs nor hot water. The athletes had the additional company of mosquitoes and bats. Nevertheless, they still managed to win comfortably by fourteen points.

Teams usually travelled by sea and, as we have seen, difficulties were experienced because of the long trips. Sylvia Cheeseman wrote a column called 'With the Girls' in Athletics Weekly during the Empire Games of 1950. In this, she described the conditions experienced throughout the trip. As well as the English athletics teams, the English swimming, wrestling, boxing and weight lifting teams were on the boat. In addition, the Scottish, Welsh and male Nigerian athletes travelled with them. There were four athletes to each cabin, which obviously did not mean much space or privacy during the journey. In order to check that they kept their cabins tidy, the ship's crew inspected them four times a week.

As far as the practicalities of keeping fit were concerned, the women ran at seven-thirty each morning on the deck, supervised by Miss A. D. Linnear, a Loughborough physical education instructor. They followed this with an hour of drilled exercises at eleven o'clock and again at five o'clock. These consisted mainly of

¹¹¹ Her employers, Bowaters Ltd, paid her expenses.

short sprints, stretches and skipping. The marathon runners also ran round the deck at six o'clock in the morning, and in an attempt to improve her chances of keeping fit, Sylvia Cheeseman joined them each day. For recreation, they often played deck tennis and they could swim. When the ship docked at Curacao and Panama, the athletes were able to train on land. The teams were obviously well catered for, with ten doctors, a masseur and a nurse accompanying them on the ship. Despite the aforementioned controversy that was caused, Sylvia Cheeseman wrote that the teams were encouraged to mix, and a good team spirit was established during the journey.¹¹²

The information provided in this chapter does not support Mary Leigh's assertion that 'the hardships European women withstood as a result of World War II made American objections to women's competition in sports seem ridiculous.'¹¹³ Certainly it would not be unreasonable to assume that the greater role women fulfilled during war time, would have undermined doubts over the amount of physical exercise they could safely endure. However, as we have seen, the evidence reveals quite the opposite. After the war, the IOC and IAAF declined to expand the programmes of their championships. Opposition to women's participation remained, particularly in distances longer than 200 metres and against the shot putt. It does not appear that the war had an immediate effect on the international athletic opportunities for women.

The lack of new events for women can be partly explained by the economic hardships experienced in many countries. As time went on, these factors were replaced by other arguments. As was reflected in the debates about the future of the Olympics, several influential members of the IOC did not see women's participation as so important as the men's. Before any proposal of additional events in either the Olympic Games or European Championships could be realised, the Women's IAAF

¹¹² *Athletics Weekly*, 21 Jan. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 12, and 28 Jan. 1950, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 12-13.

Information was also drawn from L. Robinson's interview with Sylvia Disley.

¹¹³ Leigh, 'The Evolution of Women's Participation in Summer Olympic Games 1900 -1948', p. 144.

Commission was required to provide yet more evidence that women's health would not be damaged. They also had to be able to show that the events could be fitted into the existing timetable, and that their inclusion would not be detrimental to the Games. The need for experimental races to be held, before distances were accepted as championship events, inevitably slowed the rate of progress. In the eyes of the rich, privileged men that made up the international governing bodies, the world of sport remained primarily a male domain and women's place in it continued to be secondary.

Cultural factors undoubtedly influenced how sport developed during the post-war years. Immediately following the war, in a repeat of the anxieties expressed after the 1914-1918 conflict, there was concern about the roles of men and women. It was argued by some that the two were becoming blurred. The higher public profile women had achieved in the war, together with the fact that some had worked in traditionally male spheres of employment, resulted in claims that women were becoming more masculine. The accompanying fear was that men would become more effeminate. Society was encouraged to return to a somewhat idealised view of pre-war lifestyles, and the 1950's was characterised by a resurgence of domesticity. Sport was an ideal arena in which men's physical superiority could be exhibited, and the differences in the strength of men and women athletes could easily be presented. The forties and fifties illustrated how female athletes continued to be viewed by those in the decision-making positions. The international governing bodies did not feel that women were strong enough to cope with either the 400 or 800 metres. Therefore they maintained their policy of restricting them to the traditionally accepted, feminine appropriate sprints. As had been the case before the war, the IOC and IAAF apparently differentiated between the experiences of working-class women, whom no one questioned should be employed in physical labour, and the women they governed in athletics. Perhaps it could be argued that distances such as the 800, 400 and 1500 metres, provided evidence that women were stronger, both mentally and physically than many liked to accept.

The possibility that sometime in the future women's performances could theoretically match men's was not one that was entertained in this period. Women could not throw as far as the men, run as fast, or jump as high. Consequently, their involvement in athletics presented no threat to the status quo. The following chapter will discuss how female athletes continued to be presented as home-loving, family-centred women. Their feminine image was regularly emphasised by the press from the time of their earliest competitions, and this theme continued after the Second World War. In order for women's athletics to be accepted by both the public and the international governing bodies, it was necessary that the participants were seen to be feminine in looks and behaviour.

Chapter Five

THE CHANGING IMAGE OF THE FEMALE ATHLETE

Social expectations not only overlay and exaggerate the physical differences which become evident at puberty, but also lead to difficulty in separating these physical differences from differences in activity levels, sporting expectations and the use of the body. Ideologies of femininity embody codes of conduct in terms of dress, mannerism and behaviour. Within the context of sport, expectations of activity levels determined by physical differences have led not only to underrating the optimum level of female performance but have also restricted appreciation of women's ability.¹

Changing Dress Styles

As we have seen, international women's athletics did not emerge until the 1920s. It was not until this time that the image of women had altered sufficiently to allow their participation in what was essentially a mixed sport conducted in public. The changing social attitudes had also led to new dress styles, a development that was necessary if women were to participate safely and efficiently in sport. During the second half of the nineteenth century, most school and college sports were conducted inside their private grounds. Many establishments permitted women to wear the tunic popularised by Swedish gymnastics. The First World War should not be recognised

¹ M. Talbot, 'Gender, Sports Sociology and Sports Science', in Social Scientific Perspectives on Sport (1990), p. 16.

as being the sole catalyst for changes to fashion as several developments began before 1914. However, the circumstances that some women found themselves in, as a result of the war, certainly did encourage some new dress styles. Women working in factories wore boiler suits and jodhpurs, garments that helped to break down opposition to trousers for women.

As the war continued, women participated in sports days organised by the army and munitions companies they worked at. Photographs showed the majority competing in dresses down to the mid-shin bone, long-sleeved blouses, and even hats. A minority of the more competitive-minded among them chose to wear shorter skirts similar in style to the gymnastic tunics. For example, when The Red Triangle reported on a meeting organised for aircraft workers they included a sketch of 'A Winner' depicting a woman in a knee length skirt, a simple top without the usual collar and pumps. The correspondent clearly approved of this more rational dress.² Flight, reporting on the same meeting, commented that

it is difficult to say which sex acquitted itself with the greater credit.

Some of the ladies took their racing very seriously, and came equipped with most elaborate garments especially constructed for the occasion.

Others seemed to regard the affair more in the nature of a joke, and seemed quite content to run impeded by the latest creation.³

Other innovations in fashion had far-reaching consequences for women's involvement in sports. A crucial, if often ignored development, was the use of elastic

² 27 Jul. 1917.

³ 28 Jul. 1917.

in bras after 1914. Janet and Peter Phillips argue that this was particularly important after 1926 'when the flat, boyish figure became unfashionable and breasts became noteworthy again'.⁴ Whether many women wore bras for athletics in the early years is not certain. Vera Searle stated that she did not 'have to dispense with a bra' when changing into her racing kit because they were not available at that time. As she was slim this did not concern her, but she did acknowledge it was a problem for larger women.⁵ Later, however, female athletes were urged to ensure they provided adequate support for their chest. Surely more supportive bras would have been welcomed, not only to improve comfort but also to safeguard one's modesty when performing in front of a mixed audience.

Elastic was used from about 1911 in 'sports corsets', and in 1933 'roll-on' corsets were developed, although the cost prohibited the majority from wearing them during the depression of the thirties. For women who could afford them, they were recognised as liberating those who were 'kept from sport because they needed or felt they needed, to wear a corset even when playing'.⁶ There is no evidence that athletes wore either sort of corset but neither can one prove without a doubt that they did not. Evidence presented by Jihang Park supports the idea that they probably did not. She has argued that 'ideological and bodily emancipation converged in the immediate pre-war years and in 1910 the corset disappeared when sports clothes became more

⁴ J. and P. Phillips, 'History From Below: Women's Underwear and the Rise of Women's Sport', in *Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 129-147. 1993.

⁵ Interview by Joyce Sherlock, De Montfort University, 1987, with Vera Searle (née Palmer). Ms. Sherlock kindly lent a video recording of this interview to Lynne Robinson.

⁶ Phillips, 'History From Below', p. 138.

practical.’⁷ Training publications for women's athletics in the inter-war years do not advise athletes to wear corsets, which also suggests they were not widely advocated. The ‘modern young woman’ of the 1920s preferred to go without any corsets and as the women who participated in athletics were young and could be seen as modern in their approach to life's new opportunities, one could assume that they did not feel the need for such a garment.

By the 1920s, when women's athletics began to emerge, clothes were less restrictive with looser waists, shorter hems, and the decline of stiff collars. Fewer women wore make-up and hairstyles were shorter. The fashionable young woman of the decade was the flat-chested flapper with a boyish figure and slim hips.⁸ The popularity of this body shape may well have initially helped sports, including athletics, to be accepted for women. In the early twenties women wore tunics in domestic races and the English team wore them at the 1922 Women's Olympics. They were the only nation to wear tunics as opposed to shorts and this appears to have been the last occasion that they wore this garment. The selection letter received by Phyllis Hall stated that competitors should

provide yourself with closefitting black knickers reaching to not more than 4" from ground when kneeling, a loose white tunic of stout material belted, with elbow sleeves, reaching to 10-12" below waist. The use of stockings is optional, but most of the team will compete

⁷ J. Park, 'Sport, Dress Reform and the Emancipation of Women in Victorian England: A Re-Appraisal', *International Journal of Sports History*, No. 6, 1, 1989, p. 25.

⁸ S. Orbach, *Hunger Strike* (1986), p. 71.

without them. It is advisable to bring two pairs of running pumps and a warm coat.

Although the regulations sounded very controlled, in practice the dress they wore was not so strict. Phyllis recalled that her mother

knitted me some black close fitting knickers so I can't say they weren't more than four inches above the knee and I'd got a jap silk jumper with fairly short sleeves that I sometimes used under the pinafore ... and we all had the Union Jack, a little silk Union Jack stitched on our front but you'll see we were a mixed looking lot.⁹

The important thing was to be 'well covered'. Photographs showing women's domestic races in 1922 and 1923 show competitors wearing gymnastic tunics with shorts underneath or, in the case of the London Olympiades club, long, black, loose-fitting shorts with baggy white tops complete with club badge. The tops had sleeves to the elbow, and came to below the waist. Athletes at this time, in accordance with WAAA rules, were advised to wear a coat or wrap from the dressing room to the start line and between competitions. This was the same advice given by the AAA to male athletes, and rather than being advocated to ensure modesty, was for the practical reason of keeping muscles warm in the days before tracksuits. As late as 1951, the WAAA rules instructed that racing kit must be

⁹ Author's personal copy, provided by Phyllis Hall. Information was also taken from an interview with Phyllis Hall, 22 Feb. 1993. Please refer to the appendix, p. 367, which provides a copy of this letter.

clean and so designed and worn as not to make an indecent display of the competitor's person. Such clothing must include dark shorts. A tracksuit or wrap must be worn from the dressing room to point of competition and between events.¹⁰

Although tracksuits were not common until the fifties, by the thirties athletes were increasingly choosing to wear trousers and a jumper over their racing kit instead of a wrap. Mary Bartlett, a member of Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section, 'wore white trousers and jacket and a black top before the race.'¹¹ In the late thirties, the criticism that 'training suits' wore by women athletes were unfeminine was used by those arguing against women's participation on aesthetic grounds.¹²

Nor was everyone happy when more sportswomen began to wear tracksuits. Some female physical education teachers at the women's colleges disliked their students being seen in town in them as they travelled to and from the athletics track. Sheila Fletcher has argued that the 'track suit gave rise to much the same problems as had been associated with the gym tunic at the turn of the century'. In 1959, staff reminded pupils at Bedford College that the public did not regard the tracksuit as suitable dress for female students, presumably being too masculine. They were urged to

¹⁰ Athletics Weekly, 24 Mar. 1951, Vol. 5, No. 12, p. 10.

¹¹ Interview with Mary Bartlett (née French), 17 Feb. 1993.

¹² 'Are leading Sportswomen Good Losers? - Outstanding Critics Say "No!"', World Sports, Dec. 1938, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 40. Female tennis and golf players are also criticised in this article for being unattractive. The conclusion is that women should only be allowed to do recreative games, not competitive tournament sport.

safeguard against criticism from outside, and although we think track suits are suitable clothing, many of the people living in Bedford do not. The wearing of track suits through the town would also lead to people going into the shops with their track suits on, which would obviously not be desirable...¹³

Once athletes no longer wore the gymnastic-style tunic, they chose baggy, shapeless shorts rather than the close-fitting knickers worn under the tunic. The new shorts were favoured because it was necessary to disguise the shape of the female body. Racing tops were also subject to regulations. The rules decreed that they should not fit too tight or be low-necked. Mary Bartlett recalled that in the thirties, athletes 'could be banned if (they) wore unsuitable shorts.' Some athletes' families expressed opposition to the wearing of shorts, as they were not suitably feminine. Mary Markey, who ran for Coventry Godiva Harriers in the 1930s, remarked that her mother 'was very Victorian and of course in the Victorian age they thought ... we should be ladies not dashing around the countryside in shorts.'¹⁴

After the Second World War, the WAAA was concerned by the increasing number of athletes who wore *white* shorts. In 1948, when a new version of their rulebook was written, the association stated that in future the rule about wearing black shorts would be particularly enforced. Athletes who competed in white shorts would be prevented from participating. Presenting the correct image and ensuring modesty

¹³ S. Fletcher, Women First (1984), p. 129. Fletcher quotes from student council minutes, dating from 17 Nov. 1959.

¹⁴ Interview with Mary Bartlett and Mary Markey (née Rossi), 10 Mar. 1993.

was an essential part of women's athletics in the inter-war years, and was something that the WAAA was keen to promote. Until the AAA and WAAA merged in 1991, the rulebook of the women's association still warned competitors about their clothes. By 1960, when some athletes were wearing white shorts in competition, the rules of both the WAAA and the IAAF included the condition that 'The clothing must be made of a material, which is non-transparent even when wet.'¹⁵

As we have seen, apart from the exception of some international competition, male and female athletes regularly participated at the same venue and at the same time. Vera Searle agreed with the assumption made by Pierre de Coubertin that men would only come to look at the bodies of sportswomen, rather than appreciating their athletic performances. Certainly in the 1920s, female athletes were in a state of near-undress compared to what they wore in other spheres of public life. For wealthier women in particular, dresses were still long and bare arms were rarely seen, a fact that Searle felt was responsible for many men watching the women's competitions.¹⁶ Commenting in 1993, Marea Hartman argued that the attractiveness of the athletes, and the clothes that they wore to compete in, contributed to an increase of interest in women's athletics once the sport was televised.¹⁷

The rules governing women's athletic dress appear rigid when compared with what athletes wear in the 1990s. However, to athletes like Vera Searle, who competed in the early twenties, they represented a feeling of freedom. In addition to the

¹⁵ Athletics, Jul. 1948, Vol. 3, No. 7, pp. 16-17. See also WAAA Rulebook, Rule 58, 1960, p. 17 and the IAAF Official Handbook 1961/2, p. 57. Attention is drawn to the fact that, for the Olympic Trials of 1996, the dress rule was applied to both men and women. It still declared that clothing should not be 'objectionable when wet'.

¹⁶ Interview by Joyce Sherlock.

¹⁷ Interview with Marea Hartman, 13 Mar. 1993.

enjoyment of running itself, the fewer layers and less restrictive clothing contributed to the amount of fun she had through athletics. During the day, she usually wore a long skirt with a jacket to match and a blouse, which always had sleeves. Athletics, for her, was a way of escaping contemporary restrictions:

There's nothing like it! I mean there you are on the track and you run ... and you've taken off all your restrictive garments and all you've got on are these awful long shorts but it didn't seem to matter and the gun went ... Much better than running for the bus and trying to look as if you're not too late in high heels! ... you can imagine when we took off all those things and got into our shorts and a tunic ...¹⁸

Several new types of physical activity became fashionable in the inter-war years. In the early twenties, office 'rambling clubs' were formed, as improvements to transport meant that the countryside became more accessible to working people. When the Association of British Youth Hostels was founded in the 1930s, hiking holidays became increasingly popular for the working classes. Cycling was another inexpensive and popular way to travel, and both men and women enjoyed the countryside and hostels in this way. Fashions reflected these leisure interests, and more young women began to wear trousers and other styles of clothes that increasingly resembled those worn by men. The new dances, such as ragtime and jazz also influenced women's dress, as these too required a greater freedom of movement. By 1930, the fact that more women were involved in sport was recognised as leading to new fashions. Lord Decies, President of the WAAA, wrote that

¹⁸ Interview by Joyce Sherlock.

Not a few, I think, of the very drastic changes in women's fashions of recent years are directly attributable to the greater freedom desired by sportswomen, and the saner view which they take of the benefits of fresh air and exercise.¹⁹

Sport increasingly influenced what clothes were seen as suitable for 'respectable ladies'. It is difficult to assert whether the presence of more women in sport led to changes in dress, or if the new fashions helped to encourage women into sports. The 1920s saw the first female sporting star, in the athletic form of Suzanne Lenglen. Her popularity was immense, especially in France where few journalists dared to criticise her throughout her entire career. Lenglen's influence was not restricted to France, however, and the styles of dress she wore were imitated throughout the Western world. The clothes that she chose to play tennis in can be compared to those worn by athletes. In the early twenties, Lenglen was wearing shorter skirts, short sleeves, and collarless necklines at Wimbledon. Similarly, British athletes were dressed in gym-slip tunics and short sleeved tops with no collars. As we have seen, however, female athletes went one step further than Lenglen and were advised that most competitors would do without stockings.²⁰

¹⁹ F.A.M. Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women. History, Development And Training (1930), p. vi.

²⁰ L. Englemann, The Goddess and the American Girl. The Story of Suzanne Lenglen and Helen Mills (Oxford 1988), pp. 4-6 and pp. 24-25. Letter to Phyllis Hall informing her of her selection. Copy kindly given to the author by Miss Hall. This is re-printed in the appendix, p. 367.

Apart from changes in dress styles, one innovation that certainly would have improved the lives of athletic women was the wider range of sanitary protection. Internal protection would have enabled closer-fitting shorts to be worn and for athletes to compete at all stages of their menstrual cycle without fear. Although tampons were marketed in 1933, they were not widely accepted until after the 1950s when society was more affluent and social attitudes had sufficiently relaxed. Many women, particularly those in the younger age-groups, continued to wear sanitary towels, which were bulky and prone to slipping. Baggy dark coloured shorts were therefore a necessity, particularly in the eyes of some of the older WAAA officials. Vera Searle stated that black knickers were required 'in case of accident' and as late as 1993, confessed her dismay at the encouragement of women doing the pole vault because of the problems they would face when they were menstruating.²¹

The League of Health and Beauty and the Significance of Eugenics

The significance that racial health arguments had in the nineteenth-century has already been briefly discussed. Before looking at debates about the safety of athletics for women, it would be useful to consider how eugenic theories encouraged support for a more physical role for wealthier women after the two world wars. After the First World War, England like America and the rest of Europe, was caught up in an atmosphere of 'sports mania' to such an extent that sport appeared to become an extension of war. Nationalism was increasingly asserted, even amongst countries that had previously been allies.²² Opposition to women's involvement in a greater range of

²¹ Interview with Vera Searle, 27 Sept. 1993. See also Phillips, 'History from Below', pp. 139-143.

²² Englemann, The Goddess and the American Girl, p. 17.

sports declined and for the first time women as well as men were recognised as having a place in this world. While the differences between men and women were still emphasised, the modern woman was recognised as being more active and more independent than had previously been accepted. When sportswomen achieved national victories, as the English athletic team did throughout the early twenties, their involvement served to feed the chauvinistic atmosphere of the time, thus helping to gain acceptance for women's new role.

As we have seen, the emphasis placed on the health of the nation, resulted in an atmosphere that was conducive to the development of women's physical activities as well as men's. Women's health was important to ensure the future health of the nation as a whole. Their increased involvement in leisure pursuits was part of a general emphasis on the body beautiful and was part of a modern culture distinct from the pre-war world. Englemann has proclaimed that 'the cult of the perfect physique was linked to the politics of the time. It was progressive in looking towards the eradication of poverty and disease'. Physically active women were for the first time presented as the ideal body shape.²³ In 1930 Lord Decies, President of the WAAA wrote that

Results have shown too, the fallacy of the argument that vigorous open-air exercise impairs the natural beauty of women. The trim-figured

²³ Englemann, The Goddess and the American Girl, p. 6. See also, E. Wilson and L. Taylor, Through the Looking Glass (1989), p. 76. They noted that in the Soviet Union, sculptures of healthy and strong mothers were exhibited alongside muscled peasants, and that the New York Times described Suzanne Lenglen as 'one of the most wonderful machines that has ever been created out of a woman's body'.

athletic girl of to-day can afford to smile at her seniors who solemnly prophesied a lamentable shapelessness as a result of playing games.²⁴

It was not only competitive sport that grew in popularity during the inter-war years. In the late 1920s, the National Council of Girl's Clubs started several 'keep fit' campaigns in the North of England. Subsequently, similar classes developed around Britain. In 1930, the League of Health and Beauty, which was to herald what became almost a mass movement, was founded in London by Mollie Stack. The very name that Stack initially gave to the movement, the Build-the-Body-Beautiful-League, illustrated the links between her ideas and the emphasis placed on the body in this decade. The aim of the League was to improve the health of all women rather than just the wealthier sections of society and it saw itself as 'some sort of feminist organisation dedicated to peace.'²⁵ It was not restricted to Britain but also had members in Australia, Hong Kong, and Canada. Anxiety over an apparently inexorably declining birth rate, meant that the need to improve the health of women in order to safeguard the health of the nation, was always one of the theories that shaped the movement. As long as women's physical activity was presented as vital for the country as a whole, it did not threaten the patriarchal structure of society.

The class members were dressed first in gymnastic-style tunics and then in black knickers and white tops, not unlike those worn by athletes. Although the League was accused of similarities to the fascist movements in Germany, it did help to sanction 'displays of scantily-clad female bodies that would have been unthinkable

²⁴ Webster, *Athletics of To-Day For Women*, p. vi.

²⁵ J. Matthews, 'They Had Such a Lot of Fun: The Women's League of Health and Beauty between the Wars', *History Workshop*, 30, 1990, p. 23.

for respectable women in an earlier time.’²⁶ In this way, although ‘keep fit’ was uncompetitive and therefore different from sports like athletics, it did contribute to the greater acceptance of women wearing rational dress, whilst doing physical activities in public. Undoubtedly the emphasis on national efficiency, in the years before the Second World War, helped to make women's sports more acceptable as the health of women was targeted. The Government's Fitness Campaigns of the 1930s were recognised as encouraging thousands of women to become involved in physical activities. It was advocated that women should make greater use of running tracks and both hockey and cricket playing fields, as sports for women in general were increasingly recognised as benefiting the nation. It was estimated that by the thirties there were

at least 20,000 girls and young women in this country participating in all forms of track and field athletics, and each in her own way is an ambassadress for national fitness. This argues well for future generations.²⁷

The Continuing Debate about Whether Women should Participate in Athletics

Despite this optimism, there was a continuing debate about the suitability of athletics for women. The changing image of female athletes during the first half of the twentieth century, was inevitably linked with perceptions about their bodies. As successive women showed they could participate in sports without cause for concern,

²⁶ Matthews, ‘They Had Such a Lot of Fun,’ p. 33, for both quotes.

²⁷ M. Cornell, Fitness For Eve. Some Practical Hints For Training (1939), p. 6.

the traditional myths that limited their participation became harder to maintain. The struggle to widen athletic opportunities was ultimately a bout over whether women had the right to decide what was good for their own bodies.²⁸ The Athletic News, commenting on the first women's international at Monte Carlo in 1921, reflected the contemporary doubts that they should be involved:

Just now we are being regaled with reports of the doings of a team of lady athletes who have gone to Monaco - or somewhere in that neighbourhood - to compete as representatives of this country in an "Olympic Games." I hope they are doing this country proud, though I doubt it. Women may do quite well at sports - as they certainly do. At strenuous sports, too, such as swimming, but there seems to me a limit to these things, and putting the shot appears as the last word ... An authoritative opinion on ladies' football, and shot putting, and other unladylike pursuits is somewhat overdue.²⁹

In the early twenties, the question of whether women risked injuring their health by participating in sports, was discussed in both newspapers and medical journals. Miss C. Cowdroy, from Crouch End School and College in London, wrote in The Lancet in 1921 that sportswomen would have difficulty in conceiving. Furthermore, she suffered 'frequently (from) nerves ... from heart trouble ... or from

²⁸ M. A. Hall, Feminism And Sporting Bodies. Essays on Theory and Practice (Leeds, 1996), has written that, although 'female bodies have always been central to feminism... sporting bodies have not'. This is slowly changing and she provides an excellent over-view and discussion on recent debates. See also C. Shilling, The Body and Social Theory (1993).

²⁹ 28 Mar. 1921.

displacements of some kind (and) sometimes the monthly disability which should prove them stops for long periods.' Cowdroy warned that in addition to physical dangers, the appearance of women was altered by their involvement in sports, because their bodies could be more easily changed than men's. She argued that there was a contemporary trend to 'make a boy of the girl (which) has led to the cult of the "boyish" figure with under developed breasts'. Athletics, she asserted, resulted in women developing 'hard muscles, a set jaw and an ungainly carriage'. Psychological dangers were also seen to be a threat by Cowdroy, who felt that neither the 'attitude' nor 'mentality' of sportswomen was healthy. She hinted ominously that sports could increase the possibility of lesbianism, and warned of 'the curious influence exerted by some of these women on girls, neurotic girls, seemingly obsessed by them'.³⁰

Margaret Thackrah, who had studied students at one of the girl's physical training colleges, disputed these claims in a subsequent edition of *The Lancet*. Any amenorrhea, which occurred only in about 1.5 percent of students, had always been short term and had never caused ill-health. Thackrah concluded that sportswomen were physically and mentally healthier than their idle sisters, and any 'unhealthy' friendships were the inevitable result of single-sex environments whether they be male or female.³¹

The training advice given to women throughout the inter-war years, was that they should use only moderate levels of effort. In 1938, Douglas Lowe the Olympic 800 metres champion of 1924 and 1928, wrote 'that the risk of strain chiefly concerns boys, women and girls; and whilst athletics in moderation are perfectly

³⁰ 'The Danger of Athletics For Girls and Women', 14 May 1921, No. 1, p. 1050. Please note that 'athletics' means all sports in this case.

³¹ The Lancet, 'The Danger of Athletics For Girls and Women', 18 Jun. 1921, No. 1, p. 1328.

suitable for them all, there are certain limitations which ought to be recognised.' In accordance with this, he advised that it would be safer for women

to concentrate on style and grace ... and only compete with moderation.

By doing so they will retain their femininity, which is one of the world's assets; and if they bear in mind that their athletic clothing can be both smart and effective, there will be fewer criticisms of athletics for their sex.³²

Any evidence of 'straining' was interpreted by critics of women's athletics that an event was not suited to the female body. In July 1938, Andrew Sharpe wrote in the Daily Mirror that women had to choose between 'Babies or Records'. He quoted Professor Donald A. Laird, who had argued that the development of muscles was detrimental to motherhood'. Sharpe also claimed that several gynaecologists had indicated to him that strenuous activity by women led to a weak heart that would not be able to cope with the strain of labour. In an argument reminiscent of Rogers in America in 1929, Sharpe said that women should stop trying to imitate men and limit their participation to recreational activity purely for fun.³³

Several of these claims were also made in an article published in the New Zealand Sporting Life, which had been written in response to a request by the Council of the New Zealand Amateur Athletic Association. It was subsequently reproduced in World Sports in December 1938. The New Zealand association was thinking of

³² 'The World of Athletics', World Sports, Apr. 1938, Vol. 4, No. 6, p. 199-200. This is a summary of his advice in the then forthcoming book, Track and Field Athletics.

³³ A. Sharpe, 'Babies or Records', Daily Mirror, 1 Jul. 1938.

holding a women's track and field championships and wished to gather opinions on the subject. It was argued in the article, that regular testing and the knowledge of contemporary medical opinion, was important to dispel the fear that athletics may cause harm to the reproductive organs of women. Unfortunately, some medical arguments still claimed that harm could result, and the fears this led to became a 'ghastly obsession' with the female athletes themselves. Questionnaires were sent out from America to leading women athletes in the world, including Britain's Muriel Cornell. It was accepted that while women's physiological characteristics meant they had less lung power and less strength, muscular development did not impair the ability to give birth. In comparison to their mothers, contemporary girls at colleges in America were 'stronger, taller, broader of shoulder and much healthier'.³⁴

In response to this article, the honorary secretary of the WAAA Muriel Cornell dismissed the myth that reproduction would be put at risk by athletic performance. She pointed out that expectant mothers were encouraged to undergo exercises in order to improve their abdominal muscles before birth, and she argued that by participating in sports women were simply doing the same thing. It was reported by the WAAA that 'many of our leading athletes have given birth to a child in the first year of marriage, and in many cases it would seem that most women athletes are able to have a big family if they so wish'. In addition, contrary to earlier theories, children of athletes were found not to be 'mentally or physically defective' but were 'agile, mentally advanced for their years, and well up to, or even above, standard generally'.³⁵

³⁴ 'Are Leading Sportswomen Good Losers', *World Sports*, Dec. 1938, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 36-40.

³⁵ M. Cornell, 'My Answer', *World Sports*, Dec. 1938, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 57-59.

Females were told to reduce the level of physical exertion once they experienced the onset of puberty. F.A.M. Webster, who had two athletic daughters of his own and wrote several books on athletics, was largely progressive in his views on female participation. Nevertheless, he agreed that the onset of puberty and between 'fourteen and eighteen years of age (were) the most critical period in the female life, (when) the athletic activities of girls should be closely watched and even more carefully regulated'. He felt that before this time, and particularly before the 'slightest sign of bust development', girls and boys could safely participate together in all forms of athletics, including the pole vault. After the age of eighteen, when '(the female) frame has become more set and her life is regular ... she may let herself go and really enjoy vigorous physical exercise'.³⁶ The same view was expressed by Adolphe Abrahams, older brother of Harold Abrahams and the honorary medical adviser to the British Olympic Athletic Team from 1921. In 1951, he said that there were few differences between girls and boys until the age of twelve. However, their physical abilities then became too different to continue activities together. Girls would have to strain in order to keep up with their male team mates.³⁷

By the 1950s, some medical opinion was providing scientific support for women's athletics during menstruation. This was in marked contrast with the opinions of earlier times. There was, however, still debate about whether menstruation reduced performance. In 1954, Sir Adolphe Abrahams wrote that it was

generally agreed that during these physiological fluctuations there is no necessity to suspend or even modify the performances of ordinary tasks

³⁶ Webster, *Athletics of To-Day For Women*, p. 7.

³⁷ A. Abrahams, *Woman: Man's Equal?* (1954), p. 148.

and duties, mental or physical ... there is no handicap of any kind. There is no reason to refrain from participation in ordinary games and sports of moderate severity: indeed a certain amount of exercise is beneficial. But in the case of high grade competition demanding the highest physical efficiency there is a distinct, if comparatively small, handicap.

Abrahams based his comments on discussions with contemporary 'leading girl athletes' whom he described as representing 'the best type of English womanhood'. All but one replied that although their general well-being was fine, they felt 'a sense of inferiority during the two or three days preceding the onset and by contrast felt less conscious during the actual establishment'.³⁸

This differed from the conclusions made after the 1952 Olympic Games. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Sports in the Cultural Pattern of the World provided information based on women's performances at that Olympiad. The data revealed that sportswomen were stronger and more physiologically able to cope with physical exercise than previously had been thought. In addition, they often performed to a higher standard than an average male. This study, which it should be noted was far more scientifically carried out than Abrahams's work, also discussed menstruation. It concluded that 'exercise, even in its competitive forms, does not disturb the menstrual cycles of trained athletes'. Several world and Olympic records had been achieved during menstruation, proving that for some athletes it caused no

³⁸ Abrahams, Woman: Man's Equal?, pp. 38-39.

difficulties. The associated fears that female athletes would have lower rates of fertility and more problems during labour were also dismissed by this report.³⁹

Throughout the fifties, studies produced contrasting findings on these issues. David Ryde referred to several recent studies in the Nursing Mirror in 1956. As the article was reproduced by Athletics Weekly in 1957, it can be assumed that British athletes took his views into consideration. Ryde declared that, within athletics for women 'many restrictions are still commonly accepted, often without foundation, and the medical profession must accept its share of the responsibility for this'. One American report had found that menstruation did not necessarily result in poor performance. Other tests indicated that the onset of menstruation was characterised by lower strength but this was contested by yet another report that claimed that most athletes were unaffected, or actually performed to a higher standard. The author concluded that 'from these conflicting reports, one can deduce that menstruation does not have much effect on exercise' and that 'while not whole-heartedly approved of by all sections of the medical profession, vaginal tampons are certainly convenient to wear during exertion.'⁴⁰

The actions of the WAAA did not challenge the prevailing ideology that the main concern of women should be safeguarding their ability to have children. In the period after the war, society was naturally anxious to encourage an increase in the birth rate and safeguard the future of the country. Few women in this period challenged the importance placed on their role as mothers, and it was unlikely that

³⁹ E. Jokl, M. J. Karvonen, A. Koskela, L. Noro, Sports in the Cultural Pattern of The World. A Study of the 1952 Olympic Games At Helsinki (Helsinki, Finland 1952), pp. 47-50.

⁴⁰ D. Ryde, 'Effects of Strenuous Exertion on Women', Nursing Mirror, 7 Dec. 1956, pp. 679-698, and p. 705. See also Athletics Weekly, 'Effects of Strenuous Exertion on Women', 27 Jan. 1957, Vol. 11, No. 4, pp. 66-69.

women would have wished to be involved in a sport that was believed to damage their reproductive organs. Consequently, the WAAA was as concerned with testing their athletes in order to determine the safety of their sport, as were either the medical establishment or men's governing bodies. Mary Bartlett, who joined Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section in 1931, recalled that

women's athletics at that time was at an experimental stage, especially middle distance and cross-country. The rulebook was full of things we could not do, relating to age, distances we could not run and how we dressed for running ... Women athletes had a lot to prove and our own WAAA moved very cautiously. We were advised never to look too distressed after a race.⁴¹

Muriel Cornell, Secretary of the WAAA and British long jump record holder, underlined the association's position in 1938. She wrote that 'all must be agreed that if the health of the sportswomen of the nation must suffer, no excuse could be given for allowing women to take part in sport.' Cornell insisted that the WAAA would be aware of any danger to female athletes:

is it not reasonable to assume that if athletics and sport were harmful to girls, that we who are the honorary organisers of amateur sport, and who are present at sports meetings week after week, would see that damage was being done and that we should immediately take steps to either remedy the trouble or call a halt. While, however, these girls

⁴¹ Interview with Mary Bartlett.

report improved health, and find pleasure and companionship in their sport, they should be given every encouragement to continue.⁴²

Concern about the safety of women's physical activities was not restricted to athletics, or indeed competitive sport as a whole. In 1939, during the National Fitness Campaign, Adolphe Abrahams chaired a committee instructed to investigate the effect of the 'craze' upon women. Gynaecologists, obstetricians, active athletes and officials, school medical officers, 'and others responsible for the supervision of exercise for girls and young women' were all interviewed. Athletes were included who had been involved in 'strenuous competitions' and had since had children. The only condemnation came from a German doctor, while the British evidence refuted all claims of damage. The athletes 'stated their conviction of improved health as a direct result of exercise'. Unfortunately, a similar committee chaired by Abrahams, which was established in 1939 to investigate psychological effects of competitive sport, was curtailed by the outbreak of war. If it had been completed, it is probable that a similar positive conclusion would have been reached. Instead, as late as 1954, Abrahams was still repeating the opinion that women found it difficult to adapt to 'normal life' after participating in competitive athletics. In spite of the fact that many international athletes subsequently fulfilled the traditional role of wife and mother, he argued that sport reduced women's feminine qualities and the

masculinizing nature produces the virago type. Muscular and physical vigour with athletic distinction may, they think, be purchased at an exorbitant price, at the sacrifice of certain moral qualities with

⁴² World Sports, Dec. 1938, p. 58.

disappearance of that softness and ductility we are still glad to identify with womanhood's charm.

To the objection that the same process must occur in a young man, the answer is that combativeness and aggressiveness are essentially male qualities.⁴³

To men like Abrahams, international athletics was still viewed with misgivings, although recreational sport was supported for women as a means of improving their health. Admittedly, by the 1950s such opinions were rarer than during the inter-war years. However, the fact that the British Olympic Medical Adviser, albeit at the end of his term in office, supported such old-fashioned ideas indicates that not all athletic governing bodies were keeping up with the changing opinions within their sport. It would appear that once performances improved in women's athletics, concern grew about their involvement. The acknowledgement that they were training harder was accompanied by an increased anxiety that their bodies were not designed to cope with such activities. It was admitted that while prejudice coloured judgement, it would remain the case that

the appearance of distress and suffering at the end of a severe athletic effort, bad enough in the case of a man, is doubly unattractive and alarming in the case of a girl, so that apart from aesthetics, fear is expressed of strain upon the circulation and other systems. This applies

⁴³ Abrahams, Woman: Man's Equal?, pp. 157.

no more and no less to both sexes but particular solicitude is expressed by earnest inquirers, who, with their eyes on the next generation, are dubious of the wisdom of strenuous physical exertion when practised by potential mothers.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, many coaches and administrators who were actively involved with female athletes had already dismissed the dangers of competition. Their views were based on the evidence provided by earlier generations of athletic women, who had not suffered ill health themselves and had since become mothers of healthy children.

It needs to be stressed that the debate about the effect of sport on women was not restricted to medical circles. In the fifties, Athletics Weekly published several articles that had been written in response to continued concern. While it was recognised that women were working harder, they were specifically warned against over-training. The physiological and psychological differences between male and female athletes were emphasised in several articles which were aimed at women and published in the specialist athletic press. In April 1955, George Pallett wrote an article called 'Does Athletics Harm Our Girls'.⁴⁵ He looked at the various arguments that had been used since the 1920s in order to legitimise opposition to women's participation. Pallett denied there was any evidence that the sport resulted in either greater injuries or reproductive problems. Instead, sport reflected and promoted academic ability.

By the mid-fifties, as Pallett's article illustrated clearly, two distinct schools of thought had developed. The American Athletic Union had recently published results

⁴⁴ Abrahams, Woman: Man's Equal?, pp. 152-153.

⁴⁵ Athletics Weekly, 23 Apr. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 17, pp. 14 -15.

from a long-term study which had looked at 250 case histories of athletes, some of whom had been involved in 'strenuous' sport for as long as thirty-five years. Nine women's colleges had been involved and doctors from both within the education system and general practice were consulted, including four experts from the United States Medical Association. This large and well-researched study concluded that athletic activity was safe for women and girls. The femininity of female athletes was also judged not to be at risk. Indeed sport 'made women more aware of the need for good grooming and for a feminine manner'. There was, however, still the assumption that their nerves limited some women and therefore that care should be exercised, especially during menstruation. 'Highly strung girls' were considered potentially to suffer from the demands of competition. Finally, it was noted that activities, which might result in a 'heavy fall on the back' during the first few days of menstruation, were not recommended!

In contrast to this favourable report, Pallett also discussed the findings of the Belgian Medical Society of Physical and Sporting Education, which had judged that women should refrain from athletics. They gave their reasons in the following terms:

Women are: (1) restricted in their training and sporting efforts because of their glandular structure; (2) over-vulnerable to emotional factors; and (3) extremely liable to organic upsets.⁴⁶

Like Pallett, Harold Abrahams dismissed this as 'out-of-date'. Describing himself as a 'sporting suffragist', he argued that the evidence provided by women participating

⁴⁶ G. Pallett, Athletics Weekly, 23 Apr. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 17, pp. 14-15. See also H. Abrahams, 'These Doctors Talk Nonsense!', World Sports, Mar. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 3, pp. 28-30.

in all sports over the last quarter of a century, now made it 'nonsense to suggest that women should not take part in athletics'. He declared that

even if evidence could be produced of a few dozen, or even hundreds, who have suffered physically or psychologically, what would that prove? At the most it would indicate that competitive sport is not good for some women, just as it is not good for some men.

Abrahams poured scorn on all three claims of the Belgian Medical Society in turn, commenting that

possibly women cannot train as hard as men such as Gordon Pirie, Jim Peters or Emil Zatopek. We know they cannot run as fast as men or jump as high. But no one suggests that they should compete against men, and one of the basic reasons (I speak with knowledge of my own former prejudice) is comparing women's performances with men's.

I have seen women distressed after strenuous competition, but I have seen men just the same. Of course, the mere male is more distressed himself to see a woman athlete exhausted than a man.

Competitive sport has come to stay, and it will need something more impressive than a few pompous utterances to stop it.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ 'These Doctors Talk Nonsense!', World Sports, Mar. 1955, pp. 28-30.

While it is uncertain how much influence negative studies had on the athletic world, they should not be dismissed. Pallett noted that whenever medical reports proclaimed that harm would be caused to women, they were 'seized on (by) sceptics'. Calls for the expansion of the women's programme at major championships were still refused, primarily because of fears about the effect upon them. The IOC in particular appeared to persist in their belief that women needed to be protected for their own good. Women were perceived as being different from men in a way that meant they were unable to participate in athletics as safely or efficiently. The influence that doctors had within the sporting world remained a powerful force. As long as some medical opinion still argued that women could be harmed there was always likely to be resistance to their participation.

Whether it was safe or desirable for women to compete in athletics should not be seen in terms of a battle between the sexes. Mary Flin's article published in Athletics Weekly in 1955 addressed what she referred to as the 'Age Old Question' of whether women should participate in serious athletics. Flin, who was an active athlete at Selsonia LAC, was studying at the English Nonnington College of Physical Education. She made the important point that it was mothers who feared that athletics could damage their daughters, both aesthetically and medically. The worry that participation would prove financially expensive was felt by Flin, to be the main reason why fathers resisted their daughters' involvement. While the traditional dislike of seeing women tired at the end of a race was largely attributed to male criticism, Flin recognised that within athletics itself, opinions had changed and most people

supported their involvement. The problem was that it was 'the man who knows little about athletics who has so much to say.'⁴⁸

The Importance for Sportswomen of being Recognised as Feminine

The role that Suzanne Lenglen played in the struggle to popularise women's sports in the twenties has already been discussed, with reference to the dress she wore while competing. However, it is important to note that it was not only the success of Lenglen that assured her popularity. Just as important, she was recognised as remaining feminine, both on and off the court, and behaving very much as a 'lady'. While others strained on court and looked exhausted, Lenglen

made it appear easy (and) while those across the net from her scrambled frantically and huffed and puffed ... the goddess moved with seemingly effortless and efficiency like a beautiful gliding bird in flight.⁴⁹

Her actions disarmed any potential criticism. As we have seen, opposition to women's sport was frequently rooted in the dislike of women displaying any effort. Facial expressions that revealed pain were repeatedly referred to as evidence that women were doing themselves harm. For their involvement in sport to be accepted,

⁴⁸ M. Flin, 'The Age Old Question. Should Women Do Serious Athletics?', 24 Dec. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 52, pp. 6-8.

⁴⁹ Englemann, The Goddess and the American Girl, p. 6.

especially in the inter-war years, women were certainly required to do as Lenglen had done and make it 'appear easy'.⁵⁰

In 1925, Sophie Elliott-Lynn described the problems that women's athletics initially had in persuading the public that the sport was safe for women. The problem that had to be overcome was that

the word "athletics" seems to convey to the general public the idea of strenuous racing to the last gasp. According to the last three years' press cuttings, and conversation, many people picture the woman athlete as struggling bravely, but unpicturesquely, past a winning post ...⁵¹

Despite the debates that continued about the suitability of athletics for women, most of the articles in the general newspapers, with the exception of those during the 1928 Olympic Games, were supportive of women's athletics. The success of the English women undoubtedly encouraged the positive reports on the sport, as well as the amount of press coverage allocated in the early years. The 1924 women's international, held in England, was the subject of regular publicity before and after the event. The day after the event, the entire front page of the Daily Mirror was filled with seven action photographs. Joe Binks wrote in the News of the World that 'it was a brilliant and unqualified success.' The report mixed factual reports of the athletes' performances with descriptions of the appearance and behaviour of the competitors. Readers were assured that the athletes remained both attractive and feminine.

⁵⁰ Englemann, The Goddess and the American Girl, p. 6.

⁵¹ S. Elliott-Lynn, How To Be a Sportswoman and Why (1925), pp. 15-16.

Emphasising the femininity of the athletes was an important aspect of the newspaper reports, which provided a colourful image of proceedings:

Perhaps the only people who did not thoroughly enjoy themselves were the officials armed with megaphones, whose duty it was to induce the competitors to leave the dressing rooms and get on the track. All out for the 100 yards hurdles,' (the officials) bellowed like angry young lions, 'but Maud and Mary and Lisette and Kathe were not to be bullied into the open until their bandeaux had been properly adjusted, or until they were sure that their numbers were on straight. When the last finishing touches had been made, and the last glance in the mirror had been taken, they tripped daintily into the arena, and smiled, sweetly at the purple-faced men with megaphones.⁵²

Not all comments were supportive, however. If there was any doubt about the sexual characteristics of the women competing the general press were quick to remark upon it. The athletics correspondent for The Times implied that some of the successful athletes at the 1934 London Women's World Games were not *real* women. He made it clear that athletes that appeared to possess the most 'feminine' characteristics were not the ones who performed to the highest standard:

Mlle. Walasiewicz, like Mlle. Z. Koubkova, of Czechoslovakia, who raced home many yards ahead of an exhausted field in the 800 Metres, possesses a physique which hardly looked fair. No doubt it is to such

⁵² News of the World, 5 Aug. 1924.

Amazons as these that women's athletics will look in their brave pursuit of Olympian ideals and male times...⁵³

Concern was expressed about the athletes' masculine appearance, which was deemed unnatural and unfair to the more acceptably feminine competitors. It is interesting to note that criticism was not aimed solely at competitors in the longer distance, but also at those in the sprinting events, which were traditionally considered appropriate for women. Stella Walsh, who is referred to above as Mille Walasiewicz, had competed in all three sprinting events, winning the 60 metres and placing second in both the 100 and 200 metres. Opposition to the 800 metres was apparent in the same edition of The Times. In addition to reiterating his doubts over the winner's physical appearance, the reporter revealed his assumption that the event was too strenuous for 'real' women. Yet again, the competitors were evocatively described as 'struggling home'.

The continued emphasis on the need for sportswomen to remain traditionally feminine was unfortunately not helped by either Koubkova or Walsh. Koubkova, who was described by George Pallet as 'a beautifully built athlete, and smooth in action', had set a world record over 800 metres at the Women's World Games of 1934. Her performance was recognised as undermining arguments that the event was unsuitable for female athletes, while her time of 2 minutes 12.8 seconds was described as 'astounding for a woman'.⁵⁴ Ultimately, however, Koubkova harmed the image of women's athletics and provided ammunition for those opposed to female involvement. While the FSFI initially recognised her performance, they subsequently

⁵³ 13 Aug. 1934.

⁵⁴ G. Pallett, Women's Athletics (Dulwich 1954), p. 50.

rejected it when the athlete's 'irregular sexual status' became known.⁵⁵ In later years, Koubkova decided to change her sex formally, undergoing several operations.⁵⁶

Women who were perceived to be over-extending themselves during competition were criticised more because they were not aesthetically pleasing to those watching than because they were incapable of participating in the event. For some commentators this was sufficient reason to argue that women should not compete in certain athletic disciplines. Sharpe, writing in the Daily Mirror, argued that

the sight of hefty, muscular girls sweating like horses and contorting their faces, presumably in an effort to improve their streamlining is not pleasant.

In fact, we mere men, who are sometimes lured to watch, feel sorry for 'em really.⁵⁷

Paul Gallico, who clearly recoiled at the image presented by women playing sport, also illustrated this view. In a notorious article entitled 'Women look their Ugliest when Playing Sport', he dismissed women's achievements in all the sports they competed in during this period. To him the vast majority looked 'utterly silly'. As far

⁵⁵ U. Simri, Concise World History of Women's Sports (Netayna, 1979), p. 73.

⁵⁶ In contrast to Koubkova, who was 'uncovered' shortly after her record - breaking performance, it was not until Stella Walsh died in 1981 that it was reportedly found that she was in fact a man. Please note that femininity testing and the debate surrounding it, is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

⁵⁷ 'Babies or Records', 1 Jul. 1938.

as athletics was concerned, Gallico was particularly scathing and expressed the view that the sport was not suited to women:

It is a lady's business to look beautiful, and there are hardly any sports in which she seems able to do it.

Females who don track shorts and jerseys and run and jump in track meets are just wasting their time, and ours, because they can't run fast enough or jump high enough or throw things far enough to matter, and besides they weren't built like boys (in which case this doesn't count, because then they aren't ladies); and finally they ought to get a look at their faces as they break the tape at the finish of the 100-yard dash, twisted and contorted and pitted with the grey lines of exhaustion.⁵⁸

Criticism of the appearance of female athletes was also at the root of opposition expressed by the American Avery Brundage. As we have seen, his dislike of sportswomen led him to call for the exclusion of all female events from the Olympic Games. There was no doubt some genuine anxiety about the potential harm that track and field events could do to the female body. However, as more women's athletic events were organised, evidence was increasingly available that neither their reproductive organs nor their general health was being harmed. In spite of this, the medical myths continued to be influential, especially in the minds of those who were in the powerful decision-making positions. One would hesitate to argue that all opposition to the growth of women's athletics was a male conspiracy attempting to

⁵⁸ World Sports, Mar. 1938, Vol. 4, No. 5, p. 173.

prevent any weakening of a patriarchal system. Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept that it was simply a case of medical ignorance and benevolent concern. Sport was still very much a male domain and it would appear that the privileged males in the IOC and IAAF, who controlled international sport, did not wish to see women fully participate in this world.

It was not the case, however, that the involvement of women in major championships always resulted in criticism. Individuals who attended the championships often indicated that they were impressed, with not only the women's performances but also their appearance. As discussed already, several newspapers in Britain were dismissive of complaints made against the 800 metres at Amsterdam. The Daily Sketch published an article by Ethel Brown, who described herself as 'simply an everyday type of woman who took seats at the Games from interest in first-class entertainment and achievement of any kind'. She declared that the photographs of men and women at the Games were no different and that both sexes chose to sit or lie down after their competitions. While photographs did not always show female athletes in a negative light, those that did were often used to create opposition. Men and women were supposed to look different, while the former could 'strain' the limits imposed by femininity meant that sportswomen could not:

(men) generally look murderous, ferocious, agonised or are registering determination of the most iron sort. They hardly come in happily smiling as girls are evidently expected to do - and *sometimes* they actually do! And anyway, photographs are known to be at times extremely insulting to people.

In reality Miss Brown said, the female athletes at Amsterdam were 'bright and attractive', and while they had to concentrate during the competition, once they were away from the stadium they relaxed and charmed the local population. All the articles that supported women's competitive athletics in the 1920s and 1930s, justified women's participation by providing evidence of their femininity. It was important to be able to say that 'girls will be girls even if they are also "sports".' Ethel Brown concluded her article in typical fashion, arguing that athletics had done nothing to harm the appearance of those competing:

The pretty Canadians, which group included the undisputed Belle of the Olympic Games Miss Ethel Catherwood, the smart Americans, that imperturbable young woman Miss Hitomi, of Japan, the sturdy Polish girl, the bronzed South Africans, to say nothing of the remarkably healthy-looking German madchens and our own few typically fresh-looking representatives ... They're such *real* girls.

And real girls are about the best in this world.⁵⁹

A similar line of argument was taken in order to publicise the London 1934 Women's World Games. The Daily Mirror's 'Clubman' wrote that women had made tremendous improvements and the best could now achieve the same as 'tip-top schoolboys'. The sport should not be seen as a danger to women, although the longer distances were more suspect. The paper acknowledged that the public were wary of athletics but encouraged them to take an interest:

⁵⁹ For all the references from the Ethel Brown article, see Daily Sketch, 9 Aug. 1928.

Feminine athleticism seems to many to convey an impression of something unbecoming a young girl. Mention of it conjures up visions of the gawky, hoydenish type of school tomboy. Really it is nothing of the sort and I hope some entertaining film company will take many hundreds of feet of slow-motion pictures at these games for they will reveal more grace of movement than many a ballet.⁶⁰

The 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, the first in Europe since the controversial 1928 Olympiad, provided an opportunity for a huge crowd to judge female athletes for themselves. According to the Daily Mirror the women competing were not found wanting, as it was concluded that 'never before have so many beautiful girls graced the Olympic games as will be seen in Berlin during the next fortnight.'⁶¹ Just how important it was for the athletes to be described as attractive was illustrated by the WAAA official at the Games. Rather than emphasising the improved athletic performances of the women's team, she chose to highlight how sport had heightened their looks. Clearly, the WAAA while fighting for increased competitive opportunities for women remained very much an organisation of its time, guided by contemporary values. Mrs C. Palmer, chaperone to the English girl athletes, agreed that she did not

think so many lovely girls have attended the Olympic Games before.

Until recent years a woman athlete was not expected to be pretty and

⁶⁰ Daily Mirror, 9 Aug. 1934.

⁶¹ Daily Mirror, 10 Aug. 1936.

she was not. But modern dieting and conditions of life generally have changed all that. Athletics make the modern woman lovely, whereas they made the woman of the past ugly with muscles and sinews.⁶²

The fact that female athletes were now seen to be so attractive was given as the reason why the men and women were strictly segregated at the Games, housed seven miles apart. While the men were 'luxuriously quartered in a magnificent park nine miles into the city', the women were accommodated in dormitories at the stadium. No woman was allowed to enter the men's park, and if men wanted to visit the women, they had to fill in a registration form indicating who they were visiting and why. The women had a curfew of ten o'clock at night and neither smoking nor drinking was permitted. They were only allowed out in groups of four, and had to be 'accompanied by a chaperone or young German high school girl'. While Mrs Palmer saw the need for a chaperone as 'old-fashioned', she argued that it was necessary if the girls were to be properly cared for. Women's morals and reputations must be safeguarded. Athletics, as a mixed sport, had to work hard to reassure parents and potential supporters that sportswomen would not harm their long-term health or reputation. The WAAA was determined that no hint of scandal could be allowed to undermine the positive image of female athletes.

The emphasis on sportswomen remaining 'feminine' was a theme that persisted long after the war. As late as 1955, one female athlete felt it necessary to justify women's involvement by referring to their physical attractiveness and the fact that they were not as strong as male athletes:

⁶² Daily Mirror, 10 Aug. 1936.

Most women are naturally graceful runners - especially our sprinters ... There are very few women who are ugly runners ... I think it is quite fair to say that on the running tracks of Great Britain you will find a high percentage of the slim, feminine women of this country. Most girls who begin serious training find their figures become trimmer than ever before, so you boyfriends, who don't like your girl friends doing athletics just beware! ... Maybe you are frightened that women will one day become your equal. In athletics that will never happen, so lets have some encouragement in the future please.⁶³

Gertrud Pfister has argued that

although open prejudices have been expressed more and more seldom since the Second World War, clichés of femininity implicitly find their way into sports reporting...the female athletes are described from another point of view, - from that of the male journalist, who, in the case of the female participant, sees and comments on not only the athlete, but also on the woman and her body.⁶⁴

Pfister wrote that this type of reporting has increased since the late 1960s. However, it was certainly apparent in both newspapers and the specialist press during the thirties, forties and fifties. Female athletes were repeatedly described with reference to their physical attractiveness, especially if they were blonde as well! This was not solely the

⁶³ M. Flin, 'The Old Age Question', in *Athletics Weekly*, 24 Dec. 1955, Vol. 9, No. 52 p. 8.

⁶⁴ 'Beauty Awards Versus Gold Medals', in *Continental Sports*, 36, Aug-Sept-Oct, 1987, pp. 27-28.

prerogative of male reporters, however. Doris Batter, who had been British 60 metres champion in 1950, reported on the 1958 Empire Games. She included several references to the appearance of female athletes, including 'Tall, Fair Valerie Sloper' and 'Striking Ash blonde Canadian Jackie Macdonald'.⁶⁵ By the late 1950s, probably the athlete most frequently referred to in these terms was Mary Bignal, who was later to achieve a gold medal in the 1964 Olympic long jump as Mary Rand. Her attractiveness combined with her success in the pentathlon and long jump meant that by 1958, she was undoubtedly a star in the athletic world. Unlike most of the earlier athletes, she was also famous outside the sporting world and in 1959, when she was Britain's Woman Athlete of the Year, a giraffe born at London Zoo was named after her 'because it was so frisky and athletic'.⁶⁶

In a reflection of the continued concern about the effect of sport on women, contemporary research concentrated on the aesthetic results as well as the physical. The 1952 report, Sports in the Cultural Pattern of the World, proclaimed that 'a third criterion for the evaluation of women's athletics is an aesthetic one'.⁶⁷ The fear that sport would result in the masculinization of female participants remained an issue of concern, along with possible damage to the reproductive organs and menstruation cycles. In 1958, the WAAA felt it necessary to write that 'no girl respecting medical advice is in danger of losing her womanly virtues through participation in sport'. Tests that had been carried out on young British athletes resulted in the same advice and G. Adamson, who conducted the tests, concluded that the scores of the young

⁶⁵ Modern Athletics, Sept. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 9, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Modern Athletics, Mar. 1960, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 14.

⁶⁷ E. Jokl (et al), Sports in the Cultural Pattern of the World. A Study of the 1952 Olympic Games at Helsinki, p.50

Mary Bignal showed that it was possible to attain male standards of fitness and still retain a feminine appearance.⁶⁸

As the struggle to gain more support for women's athletics continued, the case was strengthened by the unquestionable femininity of those competing. Tony Ward, writing about Britain's Jean Desforges in 1990, commented that

She is an evocation of a golden era of Britain's women athletics, the immediate post-war period when a bevy of athletes summarily dismantled the Amazonian image: attractive, ebullient, talented, they collected medals at every international level.⁶⁹

Several high-profile athletes like Great Britain's high jumper Dorothy Tyler and Holland's Fanny Blankers-Koen were mothers, and both press and official reports alike stressed this point. The human-interest story behind well-known personalities has always interested the reader but the emphasis undoubtedly reassured the public that these sportswomen were 'normal' women.

Blankers-Koen provided an ideal role model for feminine athletics, being a housewife and mother as well as the winner of four gold medals. Much emphasis was placed on her ability to cook and sew and how she was able to continue her domestic duties in addition to her training. The fact that she was coached by her husband Jan, winner of the 1931 AAA triple jump title, also meant that the status quo of the husband's influence over his wife was not challenged. The apparent need for some

⁶⁸ 'WAAA Monthly Bulletin. The Woman Athlete's Private Problems', Modern Athletics, Jun. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 25 and p.27.

⁶⁹ Athletics Today, 10 May 1990, Vol. 4, No. 19, p. 18.

writers to reassure their readers about this side to Fanny Blankers-Koen has remained a feature of more contemporary accounts of the stars of the various Olympic Games. In 1972, Ross McWhirter edited the largely pictorial account of the Games, The Olympics 1896-1972. This was intended to help raise funds for the 1972 British Olympic Team and had the support of both the British Olympic Association and Esso. It provides just one example of how Fanny continues to be portrayed by journalists:

There was absolutely no doubt who was the heroine of Wembley. She was a blonde, Dutch housewife and mother of two, who raced repeatedly to glory in a series of dazzling exploits, wearing the bright orange shorts which traditionally form part of Holland's international uniform.⁷⁰

Britain's Maureen Gardner, later Dyson, who was second in the 1948 Olympic 80 metres hurdles in the same time as Blankers-Koen, was also presented as being a positive example that athletics would not result in the masculinization of women. Athletes were applauded for maintaining their feminine characteristics, which were regarded as important as simply winning an event. At the Berlin Olympics of 1936, Helen Stephens although winning her event did not receive the praise her performance deserved, apparently because she did not look as attractive when competing as one of her opponents:

Miss Stephens's style was certainly not attractive, judged from the point of the charm of Jesse Owens. She possessed a phenomenal stride

⁷⁰ The Olympics 1896-1972 (1972), p. 55.

and the power of a quarter miler. From the aesthetic point of view the palm should be awarded to Miss Dolinger, who finished fourth.⁷¹

While male athletes such as Zatopek, Kuts and Britain's Chattaway also had their style criticised, the important point was that female athletes should not be seen to imitate the male way of competing. It was as important in the forties as it had been during the inter-war period for women athletes to appear feminine. Proof was still required that sports like track and field, which was considered to be more masculine, did not undermine the differences between the sexes. What was accepted as the essential nature of woman would not be allowed to be altered without a struggle. Fanny Blankers-Koen, or the 'Flying Dutch Housewife', as she was known in press reports, probably did more than any other athlete to reassure those concerned about the negative effect athletics could have on their daughters. While her husband Jan appeared as quite a progressive man, they were both aware that she was supported by many people because she was seen to fit her training around her duties as mother, wife and homemaker.

The significant role that Fanny Blankers-Koen played in reassuring people about the suitability of athletics for women, was apparent when it was reported that

recently, a living answer to these questions returned to the scene of her unparalleled triumphs at Wembley Stadium, when Fanny Blankers-Koen visited this country. Just like thousands of mothers throughout the world, this thirty-two old Amsterdam housewife and mother of two children, has to run a home single handed, do all her shopping and take

⁷¹ British Olympic Association Official Report, Berlin 1936, pp. 93-94.

care of the children - obviously not leaving much time for training. But it is reported that within two months of the birth of her daughter in 1946, Fanny resumed training ... leaving her pram in a sunny spot by the trackside.⁷²

Although this article acknowledged that physiologically women were not as strong as men, Featherstone argued that, contrary to popular opinion, women could cope with the same training demands as male athletes while remaining feminine. Sylvia Cheeseman, who was regularly cited as an example of how attractive elite women athletes could be, was again mentioned. It was noted that although she trained 'just as hard and conscientiously as does any of our male athletes ... in the opinion of many competent medical authorities, Sylvia possess outstanding physique'.

The emphasis on female athletes' domestic talents continued to be stressed during the fifties. It was essential that women were not seen to threaten the superiority of men in the world of sport. Consequently, rather than looking at the similarities between male and female athletes, the differences were concentrated upon. In 1956, the Australian star Shirley Strickland was described as 'this charming Perth housewife' who

has done clothes modelling, and is a music-lover, an expert gardener, a first class cook and a wonderfully efficient house-wife and mother ... Shirley is 5 foot 7 3/4 inches (1.72 metres) tall, weighs 9 stone (126 lb

⁷² Doctor Featherstone, 'Who Says the Weaker Sex?', *Athletics Weekly*, 13 May, 1950, Vol. 4, No. 19, pp. 4-5.

or 57 kg) and has finely tuned textured blonde hair, a perfect complexion (no make-up) and clear blue eyes.⁷³

Female athletes were not supposed to be single-minded in their quest for athletic achievements. Accordingly, they were portrayed as managing to continue as successful wives and mothers. The domestic role of Britain's Dorothy Tyler, who was still competing at elite level at thirty-eight years of age, was emphasised in the specialist athletics press, as was the fact that she was also a secretary.⁷⁴ Specialisation had been criticised for both male and female athletes, but in the case of women it was felt to destroy their so-called natural caring and unselfish qualities. As late as 1958, the WAAA justified the participation of women in sport by writing that an

observation of top-class women athletes and other sportswomen shows clearly that complete, and often striking femininity and charm are retained. Many have found romance in their sport and the names of Zatopekova, Connolly, Fikotova, Elliot, Disley, Dyson, Perkins and Blankers-Koen readily spring to mind. Better performances do not produce masculine women; those who have had the pleasure of meeting the Russian women socially find them as girls anywhere.⁷⁵

Throughout the 1950s, standards in women's athletics had improved significantly and records were being improved regularly. Both the technique and the

⁷³ J. Galli, 'Grand Finale?', World Sports, Mar. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 3, pp. 6-7.

⁷⁴ S. Noel, 'Let's Jump Back Twenty Years', World Sports, Mar. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 3, p. 38.

⁷⁵ 'The Woman Athlete's Private Problems', Modern Sports, Jun. 1958, p. 25.

greater amount of work being done by the athletes was acknowledged. At the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, the Australian women dominated the sprints and hurdles as they had in Helsinki four years earlier. Shirley Strickland defended her 1952 title and won the 80 metre hurdles in an Olympic record. The crowd's favourite, however, was her team-mate Betty Cuthbert, who was described as 'the 18 year old Sydney Flyer'. Betty was the star of the sprints, winning the 100 metres in world record time and equalling the Olympic record in the 200 metres. Her popularity in Australia was enormous and again McWhirter provides a journalist's interpretation of why she gained so much attention:

No Olympic winner is more popular, no victory more warmly applauded than the one which is accomplished by a home athlete in front of a predominantly home crowd. When that champion is a blonde, blue-eyed 18 year-old who runs with streaming hair, the ticket holders really feel that they have had their money's worth.⁷⁶

As competition increased during the fifties, Britain's women encountered athletes from Eastern Europe on several occasions. This provided an opportunity for not only a high standard of competition, but also a chance for the athletic press to emphasise the femininity of the British team. In 1954, thirteen British women competed in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, winning both matches. However, it was their appearance as much as their athletic performances that gained the most comment from Athletics Weekly:

⁷⁶ The Olympics 1896-1972, p. 63.

Once again British women's athletes have added considerable lustre to our athletic reputation by their achievements in international competition ... The public's response to our girls efforts and, let me add, appearance and behaviour, was tremendous. The Finland men's athletic teams ... are warm champions of British women's athletics ... watching our girls dancing with the Finnish athletes in Budapest, I could well appreciate the Scandinavian interest, and feel quite a national pride in the girls who had so well represented Great Britain in this Eastern European tour.⁷⁷

Criticism of communist female athletes, which was to be a feature of later years, was not indulged in by the British press during this period. Two articles published in 1955 in World Sports emphasised the attractiveness of some of the female Soviet athletes, including rare praise for one of their throwers. Writing about 'Blonde' Galina Zybina, Norris McWhirter argued that her "“peaches and cream” complexion seems more befitting a film star than a muscle-girl”.⁷⁸ Some months later McWhirter profiled Nina Otkalniko-Pletnyeva, who was the Soviet star over 800 metres and 880 yards. Described as looking like a 'ballerina' when not dressed in racing kit, Nina was presented by McWhirter as yet another example that not all Soviet athletes were 'amazons', or that athletics reduced feminine qualities:

If you imagine that this great middle-distance runner is an unattractive amazon you are wide of the mark. At the European Championships in

⁷⁷ J. Crump, 'Our Magnificent Girl Athletes', 16 Oct. 1954, Vol. 8, No. 42, p. 11.

⁷⁸ 'Zybina ... Strongest Girl in the World?', Jan. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 1, p. 27.

Berne, where she added to her collection of bullion, this dainty 27-year-old blonde with smiling eyes came out high in the “beauty stakes”.⁷⁹

The suppleness and physical attractiveness of the Soviet women athletes was also praised by the WAAA Honorary Coaching adviser, Evelyn Baker. In her article ‘What We Can Learn From The Russians’, published in 1957 after the annual Great Britain versus USSR match, she wrote that the Soviets ran like lithe young animals, with easy, flowing strides’. It had been necessary, she commented

to correct a few people's ideas that the women from Russia would be big and tough and masculine. They were on the other hand, fair, good-looking and beautifully built and look just as feminine as ours. It was a delight to see them move.⁸⁰

The shot putters were still frowned on more than other athletes due to their larger, more muscular bodies. The top Soviet shot putter at this time was Tyshkevitch, who weighed sixteen stone and was described by Baker as ‘very big built’. Rather than her beauty or grace, Tyshkevitch was praised for her courage and lack of fear about appearing on the track. Baker encouraged larger women to work hard at this discipline and succeed as the Soviet athletes had done. It would be wrong, however, to assume that shot putters were always criticised for their appearance. In contrast to the comments that were made about her in later years, Tamara Press, who had just

⁷⁹ ‘Ballerina Nina’, Sept. 1955, Vol. 21, No. 9, p. 31.

⁸⁰ Modern Athletics, Nov. 1957, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 11.

smashed the shot putt record, was described in 1959 as 'a nerveless competitor, tall and well-built without being unfeminine'.⁸¹

American sportswriters have been known for attacking the Soviet athletes' masculinity. This was not always the case, particularly in this period, when internationals between the two countries were just being established. In his article, 'Victory With a Smile', published in Sports Illustrated in 1959, Maule commented that the female Soviet athletes were 'for the most part dolls', who contrasted sharply with the unattractive Americans.⁸² America, which had always been a strong nation in men's athletics, had begun to improve the standards of its women's team during the fifties. Nevertheless, the prominence of American women in world athletics continued to fall below expectations. Undoubtedly, this was partly a result of the traditional ideologies governing the image of women in their society.

In 1956, Jack Crump wrote that opposition to athletics was still expressed by some American educationalists. They continued to argue that it was not a suitable sport for women. Crump dismissed their claims that women's femininity would be undermined as 'sheer rot':

I learn that the U.S.A. male likes his womenfolk to look and be feminine. My reply to this is that I can produce a dozen British women athletes to look and be more charming than any dozen film stars who can be produced in Hollywood. Let other countries advance claims for

⁸¹ E. Baker, 'What We Can Learn From The Russians', Modern Athletics, Nov. 1957, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 11. She improved the record by over 2 foot to 56 feet 7 inches. The Russian athlete, Galina Zybina, who had achieved 54 feet 11 ³/₄ inches, previously held it.

their women athletes, but I'll choose, for example, Ann Pashley, June Paul, Heather Armitage, Jean Scrivens and Pauline Wainwright. Indeed I'd back Britain's Olympic women's team to beat any other for feminine grace, beauty and good breeding.⁸³

Similar comments were made by Evelyn Baker in 1958, who argued that

The lack of top-class women's athletics material in the United States seems to be the result of a neo-Victorian cultural taboo which suggests that while the horse sweats and man perspires, woman must only glow.⁸⁴

They maintain that physical vigour may have been purchased at the sacrifice of the gentleness which is part of woman's charm. Personally I do not agree. Many women athletes have given up competition and are leading perfectly normal lives.⁸⁵

By the Rome Olympics of 1960, standards within women's athletics had improved significantly. It was now openly admitted that an elite woman athlete was likely to perform better than an average male. During the first two decades of

⁸² Cited in V. Peppard and J. Riordan, Playing Politics: Soviet Sport Diplomacy To 1992 (Middlesex 1993), p. 80.

⁸³ 'Jack Crump's Gossip' World Sports, Dec. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 12, p. 19.

⁸⁴ 'The Woman Athlete's Private Problems', Modern Athletics, Jun. 1958, Vol. 2, No. 6, p. 25.

⁸⁵ E. Baker, 'Development of Competitive Temperament in Girls', Modern Athletics, May 1958, Vol. 2, No. 5, p. 34.

women's involvement any such suggestion would have been mocked and in some cases, suspicion would have been voiced about the true sex of the athlete in question. One issue, however, had not altered. The apparent need for some athletic correspondents to balance women's athletic progress with a reassurance that they were still overtly feminine and girlish in both manner and appearance remained as obvious as ever. One race was described in terms that, while acknowledging improved standards, still emphasized the competitor's femininity:

A pretty blond from Australia plunges at the tape with her mouth open as if she planned to take a bite out of it and runs the 100m faster than any but a handful of trained men in the world can do it...⁸⁶

At Rome, this type of reporting increased. A greater percentage of articles concentrated on the sexual attractiveness of the athletes. The emphasis on the femininity of the British women and the somewhat sexually evocative reporting was a feature of reports in both the Daily Mirror and Daily Express. Referring to the high jumper Dorothy Shirley, the Daily Express wrote that she daintily won the silver medal 'almost coyly'. The correspondent concluded that 'there should be orchids for that shy little Lancashire Miss'.⁸⁷ Mary Bignal, who after being the longest qualifier in the long jump failed to reproduce this form in the final, was described as suffering from 'girlish nerves'. In contrast, the men were reported as failing to find their best form due to the heat and humidity. The hurdles provided a first for the British women as two athletes reached the final. Carol Quinton and Mary Bignal placed second and

⁸⁶ 'Review of the Olympic Games', Daily Mirror, 25 Aug. 1960.

⁸⁷ 9 Sept. 1960.

fourth respectively. The winner was Irina Press, sister of Tamara Press, who won the shot-putt in Rome. The difference in the physique and appearance of the two athletes was not missed by the Daily Mirror correspondent, who invoked a highly evocative image with his description of the race:

Quinton, seeming to paw the cinders like a thoroughbred parading in the paddock before a race, was off like a swallow skimming over the eaves. She just did not have the muscular power of Irina Press, one of Russian's wonder girls, but her grace and technique brought her a so richly deserved second place.⁸⁸

The Daily Express was even more effusive in its praise:

Carol Quinton as dainty as an English Rose as ever ... Looked even lovelier than ever through British eyes when she broke through the gloomy barrier of yesterday mourning (sic) by winning a silver medal in the 80m hurdles here this sun-caressed day ... for once the fleet and lovely girls of Britain made us sit up and enjoy the Italian sunshine as Dorothy Hyman and the young Jenny Smart qualified in the 100m. But this was Carol Quinton's day. The girlishly-slim 24 year old secretary from Birmingham moved with easy grace behind Russia's Irina Press.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ 2 Sept. 1960. Performances of the team were also included in the British Olympic Association Report of The Olympic Games, 1960.

⁸⁹ 2 Sept. 1960.

The female star of the 1960 Olympic Games was a sprinter, as it had been at every Olympiad so far. The American athlete Wilma Rudolph repeated Betty Cuthbert's achievements of four years previously when she captured gold in the 100, 200 and 4x100 metres relay. Neil Allen, who was reporting from Rome, wrote that her performance should help to increase support for women's athletics:

once she is into full stride Wilma is a revelation.

She flicks over the ground, poised and revelling in her wonderful talent, and the rest of the world, past and present, is just not of the same class. I defy anyone who saw Wilma win the 100 metres today ... to say they dislike *all* women's athletics. This was surely one of the most aesthetically satisfying moments in the history of the sport.⁹⁰

Rudolph was commonly described as the 'black gazelle', a nickname that was given her by the Russians after one of the USSR - American matches of the 1960s.⁹¹ Rome was the first Olympics to be televised and consequently, a huge new audience was able to watch the Games for the first time. The physical attractiveness of Rudolph has been seen as a crucial reason why the sport was covered by the mass media. She featured in magazines and on television and, in America, where fears remained that athletics would destroy femininity, this coverage should have helped to positively

⁹⁰ N. Allen, Olympic Diary Rome 1960. On the spot report of the XVII Olympiad (1960), p. 64.

⁹¹ Peppard and Riordan, Playing Politics, p. 79.

promote women's involvement.⁹² One cannot assume, however, that the success of black American sportswomen improved the status of women's athletics. The issue was not unproblematic, as Cahn as pointed out. She has argued that while their achievements may well have

demonstrated to the public that African American women could excel in a nontraditional yet valued area of American culture (but) viewed through the lens of commonplace racial prejudices, African American women's achievements in a "mannish" sport also reinforced disparaging stereotypes of black women as less womanly or feminine than white women.⁹³

From a British point of view, the sprints provided the newspapers with an opportunity to contrast the men's and women's teams, with the women being firmly favoured in Rome. The men's sprints, where Peter Radford won a bronze in the 100 metres, were characterised by false starts and dissatisfied athletes. In contrast the 'girls' were reported as going 'trimly to their marks. There was a shy embarrassed nod of apology when one girl beat the gun, and the line-up was again tidily arranged.'⁹⁴ The men were felt to be too busy moaning about conditions in Rome and making

⁹² Medicine and Sport, Vol. 15, p. xii. Selected papers, presented at the International Congress on Women and Sport, (Rome, Italy, 1980).

⁹³ S. Cahn, Coming On Strong. Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport (1994), p. 112. See pp. 110-139 for more on American black women's experiences in track and field. This chapter also discusses working-class sport in the USA in the inter-war years.

⁹⁴ Daily Express, 3 Sept. 1960, p.10.

excuses for their failure to perform as expected. In contrast the women, for once the stars of the team, were seen to be concentrating on the task in hand.⁹⁵

The importance that was placed on women's femininity was not just something that was emphasised by the British press. When the Rome Olympics was discussed by members of the IOC the appearance of the women was considered as important as their performances. Women's events could not survive the comparisons of men's times and distances. Consequently, they should be held on separate days prior to the men's competition. Although the IOC report acknowledged that the women's standards had been high at Rome, with ten Olympic records and four world records beaten in ten events, instead of discussing these competitions the article concentrated on the looks of the athletes:

I purposely made no allusion to women's events at the Olympic Games, yet they were far from spoiling the beauty of the Olympic Stadium. On the contrary they added grace and elegance to the performances and it would seem unfair to pretend that women competitors lacked plastic beauty - with the exception of the women competing in the shot-putt event - but one could say the same thing about the men competing in the same event. Most of the women competitors were admired for their good looks, among them, beautiful

⁹⁵ Daily Express, 5 Sept, 1960, p. 16. Gordon Pirie led the complaints that the Olympics were being organised as a commercial business rather than as a sport for the athletes. His main points of concern were that the events did not end until after midnight, the poor quality of the track and the unhelpful climate. The press was sympathetic at first but once the women began to achieve medal positions, they interpreted his comments as an excuse for his own poor performance.

Wilma Rudolph from America and the pretty Polish girl Janiszewska were acclaimed enthusiastically when they started their races.⁹⁶

It should be noted that many of the athletes themselves agreed that they should remain feminine. No athlete personally interviewed felt that either their looks or behaviour should challenge society's role for women. Nor did there seem to be any dislike of the term 'girls', which female athletes were consistently labelled as even after they were married and had had children. These women were not challenging the traditional role of women as primarily homemakers, mothers and wives. They agreed that 'masculine' athletes did not produce a positive image of the sport and were suspicious about the true sex of such athletes. While enjoying their new opportunities, they did not question the prevalent ideology or the coverage of their sport in what would now be recognised as sexist terminology. In a letter about women's hockey, published in World Sports in 1956, one woman reader argued that 'fashion should go hand in hand with women's sport. Sports girls should strive to retain femininity in their appearance'.⁹⁷

Sylvia Cheeseman, who competed internationally during the forties and fifties, argued that to describe female athletes as 'pretty' was a kind of politeness. Furthermore, if they were not commented on in such terms it could well have caused offence. She felt that the overt femininity of her fellow team-mates strengthened support for their participation:

⁹⁶ 'Reflections on Rome', Bulletin Du Comité Internationale Olympique (Lausanne 15 May 1961) No. 74, p. 25.

The British women's team in the forties and fifties were quite a presentable lot. I used to make a point of going to the White City and running and then putting on a nice dress and coming up, nicely dressed up. I didn't look butch at all. I felt it was my duty to the female sex to show that you could be a good athlete and look good ... all the girls in the 1952 (Olympic Games) British team were lovely ... they all made an effort and were all reasonably attractive girls.

The way that women's sport was covered in the press, and in particular the photographs that were used before sport was televised, was crucial in determining what was seen as suitable for women. Most people's experience of sport in the period before the 1960s was through the media. Subsequently, their knowledge and opinions reflected what was written in newspapers and specialist magazines. Sylvia Cheeseman noted that coverage of women increased after the 1948 Olympics, but it was the way in which athletes were portrayed that helped the sport to appear more attractive:

Generally there was a lot of publicity about women athletes, and they were always coming to the track at Richmond and taking photographs and they were coming out in the evening papers, and I think maybe parents noticed that the photographs they were taking showed not butch types with piano legs but reasonably feminine looking girls

⁹⁷ Letter from Elizabeth Leigh, Dec. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 12, p. 38.

running, and I bet a lot of fathers and mothers said, “oh that would be nice for you to do” to their children.⁹⁸

The Development of the Female Star

One new aspect of post-war competition was the increased media portrayal of female athletes as stars. It is doubtful if any member of the public today would have heard of the successful British female athlete of the twenties, Mary Lines. While athletes such as Stella Walsh and Helen Stephens were recognised in the thirties as great performers, even they were not accorded the same attention that some women were to receive in the years after 1945. Women's athletics before the war was not given sufficient publicity in the general press to result in its stars becoming internationally renowned. In addition, the early athletes such as Mary Lines did not remain in the sport long enough to build up a lasting following. The onset of television and the increasing length of time that women competed contributed to the emergence of internationally recognised stars after the war.

The European Championships of 1946 did not see any one woman emerge as a favourite of either the press or public. However, it was a very different story at the 1948 Olympic Games, where for the first time since it had been organised alongside men's, women's athletics took central stage. The women had an ideal opportunity to catch the attention of the crowd, as the men's competition, for obvious reasons, was not up to the standard of pre-war championships. The public had few established names on which to concentrate their attention and, in their absence, female stars emerged.

⁹⁸ Both quotes were taken from an interview with Sylvia Disley (née Cheeseman), 19 Jul. 1995.

Although Babe Didrikson was the first international female athletics star in the thirties, her fame could not be compared to the Dutch athlete Fanny Blankers-Koen. As we have seen, she was the athlete who was largely responsible for the increased public interest in women's athletics at the 1948 Olympic Games. She had successfully re-written several records during the war and although she was not unknown to serious athletic fans, few people were aware of these performances when the 1948 Olympic Games began. As the championships continued, however, she received an increasing amount of press attention, and by the close of the competition, her name was synonymous with these Games. For the athlete herself, the amount of coverage that her performances attracted resulted in tremendous pressure. Unfortunately, she found that she was unable to enjoy the Games in the same way she had in Berlin in 1936.⁹⁹

The importance of Fanny Blankers-Koen's performances should not be underestimated. Not only did she concentrate attention on women's events for the first time, but she was also the first woman to be recognised as the star of a championship over and above all male competitors. The role that she played in increasing interest in female athletics is expressed clearly in The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the XIV Olympiad. While the silver medals won by Maureen Gardner, Dorothy Manley and Dorothy Tyler would all have helped to increase British support, there can be no doubt that Blankers-Koen was responsible for most of the unprecedented interest. According to the organising committee, Fanny Blankers-Koen's four victories were 'perhaps the most talked of achievement of the whole

⁹⁹ F. Blankers-Koen, 'It's Fun When You're An Unknown', World Sports, Nov 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 11.

games'.¹⁰⁰ The impact that her performances had did not fade away as time progressed and subsequent Olympics passed. This is perhaps the biggest test of just how significant her contribution was. Despite arguing that the women's high jump in 1948 provided a greater degree of 'thrill and suspense', Jack Crump thought that Fanny Blankers-Koen had

rightly earned the title of "Queen of the Olympic Games, Wembley 1948." This did more to put women's athletics on the sporting map than any other single event, and Mrs Blankers-Koen, not merely by her athletic prowess, but by her sporting attitude and demeanour, made a bigger contribution than any other single individual.¹⁰¹

This type of comment marked a significant development from the days when women's athletics was seen to be little more than a joke. The high jump was the last event of the Games and, while this may once have meant a lack of interest, in 1948 more than 50,000 spectators watched it.¹⁰² Fanny Blankers-Koen's appeal was not restricted to spectators of elite competitions, however. While few athletes who were involved in the sport in the forties or fifties feel the Olympics had any impact on their decision to take up the sport, several do recognise the enduring image of Blankers-

¹⁰⁰ p. 236.

¹⁰¹ J. Crump, Running Round The World (1966), p. 105.

¹⁰² J. Crump, *Op Cit.* Britain's Dorothy Tyler won her second successive Olympic silver medal in this event. Her achievement was all the more impressive when one considers that twelve years had passed since the Berlin Olympiad.

Koen. For Beryl Randle, who was primarily a walker and did not compete in the same events, the Dutch athlete is someone she will never forget.¹⁰³

At the 1950 European Championships in Brussels, Blankers-Koen retained her position as *the* female star. She comfortably won both the 100 and 200 metres, setting a new Games record in the shorter event and a Dutch record in the longer. Her winning form continued in the hurdles, where she again ran away from the rest of the field. The enduring nature of her fame is also evidence of just how important she is in the evolution of women's athletics. She remains the best remembered female athlete from the years before the introduction of televised events. What is more, she is probably the only one that the public has still heard of today, including those not specifically interested in athletics. Britain had their own star at this time, at least according to the press, whose favourite was sixteen-year-old June Foulds. She finished third in the 100 metres, splitting the Russian athletes. Sylvia Cheeseman was also a big favourite but, however good the British athletes were, none of them were able to capture the imagination of the public and press in the same way as Fanny Blankers-Koen.

The existence of individual star athletes, both at a national and international level, was crucial in expanding and retaining interest in the women's events. The standard of performances was undoubtedly improving during the fifties but this did not guarantee continued attention by public or press. This situation was starkly illustrated at the Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952. The BOA Official Report, acknowledged that the women's events were 'regarded with a far greater seriousness', due to the fact that the athletes were 'more efficient.' Despite this, however, 'the women's events in Helsinki lacked, perhaps, the excitement which marked those in

¹⁰³ Interview with Beryl Randle, 28 Mar. 1996.

London four years ago'.¹⁰⁴ In the female programme, the most exciting contests were expected to be the hurdles and sprints, where the competition between Fanny Blankers-Koen and the Australian women was eagerly anticipated. When illness forced Blankers-Koen out of contention in both events, public support began to wane. It is clear that the popularity of the women's events rested on the performances of only a few top athletes, and if these were absent, interest faded. Athletics Weekly commented on this disappointing reaction in their report on the championships:

The fact that there was now no prospect of the anticipated battles between the Dutch girl and the two Australians in the sprints and hurdles, took much of the interest out of the women's events, despite the outstanding performances being put up all the time.¹⁰⁵

This was the last Olympic Games in which the exceptional Dutch athlete was to compete, and it was unfortunately a disappointing finale for her as she was well below form, suffering from a blood disorder. Jack Crump wrote in the British Olympic Report of the Games that 'this event will always be remembered by those who saw it with some sadness, for it marked the eclipse of Mrs Fanny Blankers-Koen.' Britain's Jean Desforges, running in the adjacent lane, was prevented from doing herself justice, as she was disturbed when the Dutch athlete 'blacked-out' and fell at the third barrier.

¹⁰⁴ J. Crump, British Olympic Association Official Report 1952, p. 33.

¹⁰⁵ 2 Aug. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 31, p. 10. For more information on Blankers-Koen's illness see Athletics Weekly, 2 Aug. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 31, p. 8 and p. 10, and 9 Aug. 1952, Vol. 6, No. 32, p. 4 and p. 7.

Australia's Shirley Strickland, who had been third at the London Olympic Games, gained a clear victory and emerged as a new female star, albeit not on the same level as Blankers-Koen. Strickland was recognised for setting new standards of technique and speed for women's hurdling.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately for Shirley Strickland, by the 1950 Empire Games a new female star had emerged from her own country. Marjorie Jackson won both the 100 and 200 metre gold medals in 1950, relegating Strickland to the silver in each race. Despite being somewhat overshadowed by Jackson in 1950 and by another Australian, Betty Cuthbert, at the 1952 Olympic Games, Shirley Strickland held a 'unique position in Australian women's athletics'. Although she did not compete in an Olympiad after Melbourne in 1956, where she retained her 80 metre hurdles title, she was still competing at elite level in 1960. The longevity of her career and the success that she managed to experience year after year meant that she became one of the best-known Australian women of this era.¹⁰⁷

Although the British women's track and field team did not gain any gold medals at the Rome Olympics, the press did succeed in creating a domestic star. The women had what was generally regarded as a successful Games, and when the male athletes failed to perform up to expectations, journalists praised the women even more. The higher places revealed the stronger depth now apparent within British women's athletics. Several large action photographs, with accompanying celebratory

¹⁰⁶ J. Crump, British Olympic Association Official Report 1952, p. 37. See also Athletics Today, 12 Jul. 1960, Vol. 4, No. 28, p. 26. This article reports that a few years after the 1948 Olympiad, the photo finish was studied again. This revealed that in addition to the bronze and silver she won in the 80 metre hurdles and 4x100 metre relay respectively, Strickland should have been awarded the bronze in the 200 metres. There was no mention of this in contemporary press.

¹⁰⁷ As well as the two silver medals Cuthbert won in 1950, she won gold in the medley and 4x110 yard relay.

headlines, were published in newspapers. Although the women had to wait a further four years to gain their first gold medal success, attention was centred on the team after Dorothy Hyman won a silver medal in the 100 metres and a bronze in the 200 metres. She was hailed as a Yorkshire heroine displaying appropriate 'grit' in order to achieve her success.¹⁰⁸ The British press was delighted to discover that a 'good story' lay behind her rise to prominence. Using her as an illustration of their belief that people from all classes could succeed in the sport, they emphasised her background as the daughter of a miner and the fact that she now worked as a tracer for the National Coal Board herself. She had been helped to buy her spiked racing shoes by the local working men's club. Under the headline 'Miners Lass Does Us Proud', the Daily Mirror proclaimed that her victory was a 'triumph of true amateurism' and one which fulfilled 'the true British spirit' of working-class communities helping each other.¹⁰⁹

The Introduction of Femininity Testing

Before the Second World War, both the FSFI and the IOC discussed the need for femininity testing. In addition to the cases of Koubkova and Walsh, which have already been discussed, Britain's Mary Weston had also caused the issue to be discussed by the WAAA. Weston was a British record holder in the throwing events who, in the thirties, declared she was to subsequently live as a man and be known as Mark Weston. Both Britain and Czechoslovakia appeared to view femininity testing as a way of filtering out women who consequently decided to live as men. They were felt to have potentially an unfair advantage over their rivals, who were seen as 'real

¹⁰⁸ Daily Express, 6 Sept. 1960, p. 21.

¹⁰⁹ 6 Sept. 1960, p. 21.

women', and the associations were anxious to have official procedures put in place. After the Olympic Games in Berlin, the FSFI discussed the problem of athletes with 'doubtful sexuality', and it was subsequently proposed by the WAAA that 'special committees should be appointed to deal with doubtful cases'. The IOC had already announced that medical examinations might be compulsory at the scheduled Tokyo Olympics of 1940, and there was speculation that the FSFI would also introduce them at all their international competitions.¹¹⁰ Femininity testing was discussed again after the war at the IAAF Congress in 1946. Here the decision was taken to establish a Commission for Women's Sports. This was recommended by Avery Brundage, who is not usually associated with furthering the cause of female athletics. Although the commission's proposals did eventually lead to a greater range of women's events, the most significant decision taken was that all women's entries for the Olympic and European Games must be accompanied by a medical certificate, 'proving' their sex was female. In addition, world and continental records would not be recognised unless this certificate was available.¹¹¹

The introduction of femininity controls increased the pressure on women athletes to act and look feminine at all times. Throughout the inter-war years, the ideal image of a sporting woman did not include facial expressions showing discomfort or pain. The female star of the 1932 Olympic Games, Mildred 'Babe' Didrikson, was described by one male spectator as 'the glorious goddess' who reminded him of 'the marble statue of the Spartan girl runner in Rome's Vatican Museum'. An interesting point is that little concern was expressed over the fact that she was reported to train hard. This was no doubt due to her being a 'working girl',

¹¹⁰ Daily Mirror, 10 Aug. 1936.

¹¹¹ Pallett, Women's Athletics, p. 68.

competing in the industrial leagues of America. Had she attended an elite women's college it would have been highly unlikely that she would have had the opportunity to compete at sports, let alone train.¹¹²

A doctor from the athlete's home country initially issued the femininity certificate. Consequently, it was not viewed as being an independent test. It was not until 1966 that any proof of one's biological sex was required to be established at a championship itself. At that year's European Championships held in Budapest, women were subjected to the humiliating experience of having to parade naked in front of three female gynaecologists. The following year saw the introduction of a chromosome test, the swab taken from the inside cheek. It was this test which was implemented on a large scale at the Mexico Olympic Games of 1968.¹¹³

There is little doubt that femininity testing was an extension of the belief that *real* women could not produce the athletic performances that were being achieved at this time. The idea that women inhabited a higher moral ground than men implied that they would not stoop so low as to take performance-enhancing drugs. While it is only in recent years that people have been aware of the degree that drugs were used by athletes in various countries, there was already a realisation that they were used within athletics. However, at this time the issue for women was whether all athletes were really female. There were still strong doubts that those athletes who possessed 'true feminine characteristics' (and female chromosomes) could achieve performances that a few years previously were deemed impossible.

¹¹² W. Meisl, 'The Babe', World Sports, Nov. 1956, Vol. 22, No. 11, p. 35.

¹¹³ K. Dyer, Catching up the Men. Women in Sport (1982), pp. 65-66, and H. Lenskyj, Out Of Bounds. Women, Sport and Sexuality (Toronto, Ontario), pp. 87-89.

The fact remained that just as women had long been subjected to pressure to conform to feminine appearances and behaviour, they were now having to prove their biological normality, because their performances were proving established ideas wrong. Jennifer Hargreaves goes so far as to argue 'that the femininity control test was the most potent symbol of the concern to prove that there is an absolute distinction between the sexes'. She has argued that, because 'it was introduced in order to prevent males from competing in women's events, ... it also symbolized the idea of male athletic superiority.'¹¹⁴ This view rightly emphasises the power that the Olympic movement, entirely male of course at this time, had over its female participants. Secondly, it shows how enduring the opinion was that women could not achieve such improved performances. However, it ignores the fact that some sportswomen supported the introduction of testing. It is simplistic to present femininity tests as entirely a case of men subjecting women to an unnecessary humiliation in order to emphasise the former's physical superiority. Instead, as Helen Lenskyj acknowledges, it was more that the 'procedures designed to bring out fair sporting competition among women only added to the stigmatization of the female athlete.'¹¹⁵ The doctors responsible for these tests, although aware of their weaknesses as early as 1968, failed to act upon that knowledge. As a result, women like Poland's Eva Klobukowska failed the test after having previously passed the visual examination held at Budapest.¹¹⁶ As Hargreaves has quite rightly pointed out, if a woman is told she is not physically all female, it is not solely her sporting career that is destroyed but her whole life.

¹¹⁴ Sporting Females, p. 222.

¹¹⁵ Lenskyj. Out Of Bounds, p. 93.

The political situation should also be taken into consideration when analysing the reasons for the introduction of these tests. Writing about the United States of America, Lenskyj traces the increased interest in the biological definition of femininity to ideological and nationalistic concerns. It was a large Russian team that competed at Budapest, and as considerable concern had been expressed about the sexuality of female track and field competitors, the 1966 European Championships was an ideal venue to introduce the testing programme. The previous successes of the Russian team, in the context of the cold war, had resulted in intense pressure on the United States to match these achievements. The press had already published rumours about individual athletes, which had been instrumental in increasing the public's doubts about the communist methods. In 1952, the Soviet team was dismissed as 'handpicked Russian amazons' whom the American athletes could be forgiven for not beating, thus implying foul play.

In addition to the Cold War, several well-publicised cases had been reported during the previous fifty years. Support for femininity testing was undoubtedly increased by these reports. They can also partly explain the apparent contradiction that sportswomen accepted their introduction, while in subsequent years there was more concerted opposition to the methods used. In 1955, it was revealed that a man had won the women's high jump for Germany at the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games. Three winners at the 1946 European Championships, where ironically women had been required to produce a medical certificate proving their sex for the first time, announced that they were men. All three athletes were reported cases of pseudo-

¹¹⁶ Dyer, *Catching up the Men*, p. 65, and A. Blue, *Faster, Higher, Further. Women's Triumphs and Disasters at the Olympics*, (1988), p. 159.

hermaphroditism: having 'male-like genitals and physique, or unusual growth of hair on the face' as well as chromosomal or hormonal indicators of maleness.'¹¹⁷

During interviews, several athletes who competed in the thirties and forties mentioned their doubts about the sex of various athletes whom they competed against. Some of their rivals had appeared very masculine, betrayed obvious stubble and spoke with deep voices. In addition, the cases of successful athletes later changing their sex and choosing to live as men, caused concern. It is clear that many felt they were faced with unfair competition and that some sort of regulation was required. Mary Markey recalled that a fellow competitor was

a very masculine type ... She used to train with the men you know. I didn't like her at all, she was too masculine I thought. I didn't think it was fair she should compete against us.¹¹⁸

Audrey Court agreed that the question was on the minds of many athletes in the thirties:

the thing that used to possibly exercise us the most was whether one could surely say some of the athletes were women. I think this was our greatest concern ... there was no testing in those days and there were one or two athletes one heard of, of dubious sex ... There was rather gossipy doubts about them, that sort of thing that goes round. I think

¹¹⁷ Lenskyj, *Out Of Bounds*, p. 87 and p. 163.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Mary Markey.

that was a side of women's athletics that sometimes was fairly uppermost in women's minds really.

You might say “well how could you not discover?” but we were more prudish in a sense if you look at it that way; we didn't undress and have a shower and in public at all. You very much kept yourself to yourself really in dressing and undressing and things like that, so possibly it never really arose.¹¹⁹

The confessions of former female athletes declaring that they were in fact men added to an atmosphere already heavy with suspicion that had been created largely by a mixture of political and ideological pressures. Such doubts could not be allowed to go unchallenged and thus the tests, like the certificate before them, were probably a necessary if unfortunate development. As women's sport became more prestigious, it also became part of the political wrangles of the post-war world and the potential for abuse increased. The Russian Press sisters, described as the 'Press Brothers' by the United States media, disappeared when more rigorous testing was introduced, therefore encouraging suspicions that they were men. The treatment they received can be compared with that of Stella Walsh, the Polish-American sprinter who had to face frequent comments about her masculine appearance whilst competing in the thirties and forties. Nevertheless, she was never subjected to the ridicule in the newspapers suffered by the Russian sisters.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Interview with Audrey Court (née Brown), 29 Jun. 1993.

¹²⁰ Lenskyj, *Out Of Bounds*, p. 89.

By the late 1960s, focus had switched to fear about drug use, particularly the taking of anabolic steroids by female athletes. During the earlier period, concern had concentrated upon men masquerading as women but, almost as soon as femininity tests were introduced, the spotlight moved onto a new issue. In 1968, steroid use by Olympic competitors was ruled illegal, although it was not until 1976 that the IAAF introduced random drug tests at international competition. This shift in emphasis did not remove the need for sportswomen to prove their sex. In the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games, female team-members were still required to show they had had a femininity test. Even if they had had one the year before, at the World Championships, this was not accepted as proof that they were a woman. Instead, they had to agree to a second test recognised by the IOC if they wanted to compete in Atlanta.

Women have always had to justify their place in sport and then fight for increased opportunities. What is not so clear is whether the athletes themselves have always been at the forefront of this struggle. There is little evidence that many of the athletes in the period before the sixties, at least, were interested in actively fighting for a wider range of events. Most of them felt, as we saw in the last chapter, that that was the role of the governing bodies. While not believing they were inferior, they had no reason to disbelieve the medical profession's claims that more training could potentially damage their reproductive capacity. Consequently they were reluctant to dramatically push back the barriers. Until the medical myths had been demolished and women had a different image of themselves, both as athletes and in the wider world, the image of female athletes was not going to radically alter. Opinions altered sufficiently for them to increase training and participate in more events, but their involvement was legitimised by the fact that they remained within strictly regulated boundaries. They had to appear feminine in order to satisfy the doubts of some

people, female as well as male that *real* women could perform to such a high standard. In the same way, they had to undergo sex testing. Several recent articles have drawn attention to the way press articles have concentrated on the overtly feminine appearance of sportswomen, and have justifiably criticised this approach. However, during this period when women's athletics was still struggling to gain acceptance, the emphasis on the femininity of the participants was undoubtedly an important way in which support was gained.¹²¹

¹²¹ For more detail and a list of studies, see L. Robinson, 'Images of Women Athletes. A Content Analysis of The British Media', (MA thesis, University of Warwick, 1991).

CONCLUSION

While this thesis has not provided a comprehensive history of English women's athletics, it has presented a discussion of how the sport developed and explored the main debates surrounding its expansion. Previously unexplored or little-used sources, such as the minutes of both the WAAA and MCWAAA, have been looked at in detail. Extensive use has been made of club records and both national and sporting newspapers have been examined. In particular this study has revealed just how much female athletic activity there was between 1921 and 1960. The amount of competition for female athletes increased dramatically between these years. As facilities improved, opportunities for more sophisticated and regular training sessions increased. As women's athletics became more established the expectations of those watching correspondingly rose. Women athletes did not balk at this challenge, however, but continually caused surprise by the new standards that were reached each year. It has been shown that women athletes did not restrict their participation to 'tripping daintily into the arena'. Instead they had both determination and enthusiasm for the sport and displayed as much competitiveness as their male counterparts. While women's athletics was not participated in by as many women as men, it had its own identity and was not merely a shadow of the men's sport.

Several other themes have been highlighted. It is apparent that athletics did not develop at the same rate throughout England, but whether one can say that the South witnessed the most activity is not clear. The points raised in this thesis reflects the work of John Bale. Although not specifically concerned with athletics, Bale, in particular, has been associated with the diffusion of sports throughout Britain.¹ He

¹ Attention is drawn to the following texts by John Bale's which are concerned with this topic; Sport and Place, a geography of sport in England, Scotland and Wales (1982), Sport's Geography (1989), Landscapes of Modern Sports (Leicester, 1994) and J. Bale and O. Moen, The Stadium and the City (Keele, 1995).

indicates how individual sports were synonymous with certain areas of the country and how there was a discrepancy of sporting provision as far as facilities were concerned. This was certainly the case in athletics which, as we have seen, was dominated by the southern-based WAAA. More research on the northern areas needs to be carried out in order to compare developments with the South and Midlands. Certainly the Midlands, which has been looked at in detail in this work, had many active clubs covering all aspects of the sport and, while a smaller region, was just as enthusiastic as the South. There is no reason to think that the North of England was any different, and the information that was uncovered about this area does suggest women's athletics was just as established here. It was obvious, however, that delegates representing the South dominated the WAAA. Some officials from the Midlands and North felt that their athletes were overlooked for teams and that both committee meetings and competitions should have been held around the country for the benefit of the sport.² If access to the northern sources could be gained, a geography of athletics in England could perhaps be the subject of future research.

Throughout this period there were far more female athletes participating on the track than in the field events. It is important, however, to realise that this was not unique to women's athletics in Britain but was also a feature of the men's sport. There was no tradition of throwing in England, although there was in the male-only Highland Games of Scotland, but this should not be seen as the sole reason why women neglected the throwing events. The sprints were by far the most popular events, encouraged by traditional stereotypes of sports appropriate to women. Practical factors were also influential; the fact that there were more domestic events over these distances and international opportunities at all major championships promoted enthusiasm.

² J. Hill and J. Williams (eds). Sport and Identity in the North of England (Keele, 1996). They argue that conflicts between the northern and southern regions were a common feature of sports.

Despite the difficulties of gaining access to northern and southern sources, it has been possible to include some information about grass roots athletics, a subject that has been neglected in favour of the more glamorous international events. Interviews and minutes from both clubs and athletic associations have revealed how some clubs operated, and perhaps more importantly, what the women themselves felt they gained from being involved. While the main motivation has always been an interest in participating in athletics, clubs enabled women to establish friendships and enjoy social opportunities. The local athletic club was a safe environment in which women could develop their physical abilities alongside other women. It also provided an opportunity for some to occupy positions of responsibility and power. Many men were involved in the organisation and coaching at clubs, but this did not deny women positions of decision-making. Consequently, they were able to influence the development of their own sport. The research has also highlighted just how important the local clubs were to the development of the sport. There was a small amount of activity within the schools and higher educational world, but the vast majority of competitions, training and encouragement came from the many voluntary enthusiasts in the clubs.

As we have seen, English women's athletics, which was established on the model of that of men's, has always been organised through clubs. However, the club structure was not unique to the United Kingdom. Throughout the competing nations of Europe, athletic clubs provided training and competition for both men and women. This was vital to the sport's development, especially in countries where the influence of the church was strong. Roman Catholic bishops in Germany, France, Ireland, Italy and Poland all opposed women participating in physical sports in competitive situations. Clubs provided a secular environment where women and girls could train for athletics.³ While Italian teams did not regularly compete after the first few years, and Irish women had to wait until the fifties before athletics began to be accepted,

³ A. Guttmann, Women's Sports. A History (New York, 1991), pp. 154–155.

women in France, Germany and Poland competed very successfully in internationals before the Second World War.

England was not the only country to have a separate organisation for women's athletics in the early years. Initially, Belgium, France, Italy, Sweden, Switzerland, Holland, Luxembourg and Argentina all had federations for women's athletics. In Germany, Austria, America, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Estonia and Bulgaria, women's athletics was established as a section within the existing male athletic associations.⁴ What was different, however, was the length of time that the WAAA remained independent.

The organisation of women's athletics in England differed significantly from the United States. As we have seen, America pioneered track and field in the women's colleges. However, as Europe began to develop the sport in the 1920s, American educationalists advocated non-competitive games. The vast majority of American athletes came from working-class backgrounds, while in England the first teams were composed of middle-class women who attended higher education establishments. Although the sport quickly attracted women from a working-class background in England, athletics remained a sport where women from a variety of economic and social positions competed alongside each other. In America, once the educationalists had established control of women's physical education, athletic competition was concentrated in industrial leagues, where athletes represented their place of employment. The only occasion that English women competed for their companies was at annual championships, organised, for example, by the civil service, post office, or national businesses. In contrast to the American situation, where athletes trained regularly and indeed were employed for their athletic prowess, many female workers only competed once a year at the championships and did nothing in between.

⁴ F.A.M. Webster, Athletics of To-Day For Women. History, Development and Training (1930), pp. 11- 27.

Although there was far more competition in English than American universities, the existence of a local club was essential if the sport was to develop. University athletics was organised separately from the WAAA and like club athletics, the women had their own federation. However, links were encouraged between the WAAA and WIVAB with matches between representative teams. In addition, athletes who belonged to both their university team and local club played an important role. They introduced fellow students to clubs which enabled women to continue in the sport once they had completed their higher education. This tradition, established in the twenties, has been essential to maintaining the depth of athletic participation in England. While many American athletes failed to continue after leaving university, due to a paucity of clubs and local events, women in Britain had a strong club structure that provided their members with training and competition. Clubs have always catered for all levels of ability, and while elite level athletes are also members, those athletes who are not international performers have been able to enjoy the sport. This was as true in the years between 1920 and 1960 as it is today.

One aspect of English athletics unique to this country is the Schools Athletic Championships, later known as the English Schools Athletic Championships. Officials from other nations have long admired this event. County competitions are provided as well as a two-day championship that spans the entire athletic programme. Even when athletics has not been taught regularly in individual schools, this event has introduced hundreds of girls and boys to the sport. Particularly after the Second World War, it became increasingly apparent how important this competition was in encouraging youngsters to join their local athletic club.

A further theme identified by the research is the amount of international success enjoyed by both the British and English women's teams. From their first international competition, at Monte Carlo in 1921, the English women led the nations of Europe. 1928 has been described as the year that England relinquished that, but, as they did not compete at the Amsterdam Olympics, it is hard to assess this accurately. A British Empire team did take part in the 1928 Daily Sketch international held in

England after the Olympics, and members of the British contingent won the 100 yards and 800 metres, while a British team beat France and Germany at an international held in the same year. In 1929, British teams were victorious in matches against teams representing Belgium and Germany.

The thirties did herald a change in fortune, however. At the Women's World Games at Prague in 1930, which was the first championship they participated in, the German women demonstrated their superiority. In previous years, the English women had been able to rely on the talents of a small number of athletes. Despite being weak in the throwing events, their superior performances on the track carried them to winning positions. The German women, however, were strong in all the events, and the points they scored in the field as well as on the track gained them victory at both the 1930 and 1934 Women's World Games. After 1933 the Nazis promoted elite sport and German women dominated the years up to the Second World War. British teams were unable to challenge a nation that was benefiting from state support and systematic training for large numbers of women. Germany was not alone in encouraging women to become more involved in physical activities in the thirties. As we have seen, concern about the physical fitness of the nation led to the British government-sponsored fitness campaigns, for both men and women. However, while this atmosphere led to greater encouragement of women to use existing sporting facilities, including tracks, the emphasis was on non-competitive fitness classes for women rather than sport. The German government, on the other hand, was keen to present the success of its athletes as evidence of the strength of their nation. While the femininity of competitors was stressed, so was their strength and power.

It was not only Germany, however, that challenged English superiority. Poland was second in both the 1930 and 1934 World Games, despite the fact that religious and peasant traditions worked against the growth of athletics.⁵ Canada, the most successful women's team at the Amsterdam Olympics, also provided strong

⁵ Guttman, Women's Sports, p. 176.

competition. As more nations became involved and developed their own associations, it was inevitable that it would be harder to win. England, which only had strength in depth in the sprints during this period, remained very competitive but was no longer the unbeatable team it had been for most of the twenties.

When one is assessing the strength of British teams after the Second World War, the omission of the 800 metres needs to be taken into account. England had several talented women in this discipline, especially during the fifties. Diane Leather was ranked only behind the Soviet athletes, who like the German women in the thirties had powerful state backing. The absence of the 800 metres in the Olympic Games denied her the opportunity to compete at her best distance in this championship, and Britain a possible medal. Leather was not the only English athlete who performed well at smaller internationals during this period. Joy Jordan, Betty Loakes, Anne Oliver and Roma Ashby were all strong over the distance. Similarly, the English women had a much stronger tradition over the 1500 metres and mile than many of their European rivals. Had this distance been incorporated in championship programmes of this period, it is likely that English athletes would have placed well in major games.

England were, however, clearly not as successful in world terms after the Second World War. Several factors contributed to this. The emergence of the USSR as an athletic force was the most obvious. After the initial challenge by the Australian team, the Soviet women were unbeatable in the fifties. The fact that they dominated the throwing events allowed them to win matches, even if individual English athletes could threaten them in the sprints or jumps. The strength in depth of the Soviet team was also an important factor. It was a rare occurrence if all three athletes failed to finish in a point scoring position in every event. It was not until the rise of other communist teams and a revitalised United States team that the Soviet women were effectively challenged.

The re-emergence of a competitive United States team also affected the world rankings. While they were only just beginning to be competitive at a world level by the end of the fifties, they had already scored notable successes in the individual and relay

sprinting events. This was partly a response to the communist successes of the USSR and the escalating cold war. Guttmann has also suggested that after the war, American ideas about the role of mothers and wives had altered sufficiently to allow middle-class women to participate in more sports.⁶

While British women athletes no longer led the world, they remained highly ranked in Europe. In the smaller internationals, between one or two nations, British and English teams regularly won all their matches with the exception of the competition against the USSR. The failure to attract women into the throwing events continued to cause problems, however. In 1956, there was no British female athlete in the world's top thirty in the shot putt, discus, or javelin. Nevertheless, successes in the track events and in the jumps resulted in team victories. While the men's performances were seen to be a cause for concern in 1956, it was acknowledged that British women's standards were continuing to rise.⁷

As we have seen, women participating in athletics have always been subject to cultural definitions about their role in society. Proficiency in sport was the traditional prerogative of men and a defining characteristic of their masculinity. When women began to encroach on this world, they were felt to be threatening the male monopoly of physical power and strength. In order to avoid criticism and increase support for their involvement, female athletes had to remain overtly 'feminine' in both behaviour and appearance. The question of how much class influenced opinions must also be taken into account. It has already been pointed out that upper-class men dominated the international associations. There had been little concern expressed when working-class women competed in 'smock races' during earlier centuries. Yet when 'respectable

⁶ Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, p. 190.

⁷ 'Britain in the World of Sport. An examination of the factors involved in participation in competitive international sport.' (Birmingham 1956), pp. 34 - 35. This was contained in a file on Birmingham University, at the NCAL. It was written by 'members of the physical education staff, Birmingham University.'

ladies' began to participate in competitive athletics in the 1920s, it was suggested that they must be protected both for their own health and to ensure the future of the nation. It was essential that women's athletic ability was not seen to have the potential to challenge men's if it was to be accepted. Supportive comments reassuring the public about the safety of women's athletics repeatedly spoke of the beauty, grace and feminine manner of the athletes involved.

Jennifer Hargreaves has noted that there were significantly more working-class women involved in sport during the twenties and thirties than there had been previously. These were mainly younger women in full-time employment and most did not continue to be involved once they married.⁸ These findings were supported by this research, although it was not universally true that all female athletes gave up the sport when they married. Some continued until they had children and a few even after that. In both cases, the number of women who remained in the sport gradually increased after the Second World War. While it remained true that the majority stopped participating, largely because of a lack of time, opposition by their families or simply a lack of energy, it is important to note that some continued as athletes or officials. Although the research has been able to clarify that there were women from working-class backgrounds who participated in athletics in this period, a more detailed analysis, drawing on a larger number of respondents, would need to be done before firmer conclusions could be drawn. However, it has been possible to say that the great majority were working in occupations that indicate middle-class or lower middle-class backgrounds. Most worked in a variety of clerical positions and no women were full-time athletes.

The findings of this research provide some support for cultural studies theorists who have argued that 'sport is an arena where values, meanings and ideologies are

⁸ Hargreaves, Sporting Females. Critical issues in the history and sociology of women's sports (1994), p. 139.

contested'.⁹ This school of thought has developed from the work of Gramsci and in particular from his theory of hegemony.¹⁰ Hegemony has been defined as

a fairly complete system of ideological dominance that works through the apparent complicity of those disenfranchised by it. Ideology and hegemony work to legitimate the status quo in many different and mutually reinforcing ways.¹¹

Sport is viewed as a site of struggle where subordinated groups attempt to change the ruling hegemony in order to achieve greater opportunities. Hegemony is maintained by persuasion rather than coercion, and is sustained by the compliance of subordinate groups, in this case female athletes. Those who do not benefit from the existing power relations believe that they are the natural order and that there is no real alternative. However, hegemony is not static nor is it total. Hargreaves has written that 'male hegemony is not a simple male versus female opposition',¹² and the evidence provided in this history of women's athletics certainly supports that. Male hegemony within track and field has undoubtedly remained resistant to change, particularly within the international governing bodies. However, both men and women have consistently

⁹ N. Theberge and S. Birrell, 'The Sociological Study of Women and Sport', in D. M. Costa and S. R. Guthrie (eds), Women and Sport. Interdisciplinary Perspectives (Leeds, 1994), p326.

¹⁰ See Hargreaves, Sporting Females, p. 22. She refers to, A. Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, Q. Hoare and P. Nowell Smith (eds) (1971).

¹¹ N. Theberge and S. Birrell, 'The Sociological Study of Women and Sport', p. 327. Although they are American writers, Theberge and Birrell's comments on this theory are relevant to the British situation. Attention is also drawn to S. Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole (eds), Women, Sport, and Culture (Leeds, 1994), which discusses hegemony and British cultural studies, pp. 11, 274-5. For an English writer's definition, see Hargreaves, Sporting Females, pp. 22-23.

¹² Hargreaves, Sporting Females, p. 23.

challenged it. Some women, notably educationalists, supported efforts to restrict women's competition and range of events, while male coaches, athletes and administrators encouraged women and girls at their clubs to train harder, strive for better performances and try new events.

Male support was crucial in gaining support for new events at international championships, particularly when the women's associations were not directly represented on decision-making committees. This was especially important once the FSFI was assimilated into the IAAF. International and domestic athletics were entirely different worlds and evidence of prejudice at the elite level should not be presented as proof that women's athletics was opposed at all levels. In England there appeared to be the desire for men and women to work together, while their respective independence was fiercely defended by the women in particular. The evidence presented has shown that the amount of male support provided for English women's athletics was far greater than previously allowed. Indeed, it is doubtful that the sport would have been able to establish itself so strongly and so quickly without male help. Athletics was dominated by male coaches, officials and club administrators from its inception, and this has continued partly because it is still portrayed as a masculine domain and because of the domestic pressures on women.

By showing how women's sporting participation has developed, it is possible to dismantle the myth that sport is a natural preserve of men in which women have not wished to participate. Much of the sociological research on women's sport has shown how they have been excluded from sporting opportunities. The medical ideology argued that women were biologically unsuited to physical and competitive activities.¹³

¹³ Attention is drawn to P. Vertinsky, 'Women, Sport and Exercise in the 19th Century', in D. Costa and S. Guthrie, Women and Sport, pp. 63-83, and P. Atkinson, 'The Feminist Physique: Physical Education and the Medicalization of Women's Education', in J. Mangan and R. Park (eds), From Fair Sex to Feminism: Sport and the Socialization of Women in the Industrial and Post-Industrial Eras (1987).

By arguing that women's bodies were fragile and only had a limited amount of energy, which should be saved for their primary role of reproduction, women's sporting opportunities were successfully limited for a considerable time. The durability of this medical ideology has been clearly shown in this thesis. Throughout the period between 1920 and 1960, medical myths continued to be used to rationalise claims by the international governing bodies that women needed to be protected from some events for their own health. In this way, medical arguments helped to maintain male hegemony and were crucial in rationalising the control exercised by the governing bodies over women's participation. However, this study has also shown that while the IOC and IAAF continued to use medical ideologies in support of their discriminatory practices against sportswomen, coaches and athletes gradually dismissed these arguments. On an individual level, athletes and coaches rejected the established medical view that women were not biologically suited to certain events. Women began to participate in disciplines that were previously not recognised as suitable for women and in this way began to challenge the male dominance.

As we have seen, it was at the international level that medical ideology was at its most influential. The IOC in particular was an upper-class, patriarchal organisation that maintained sexist ideologies and worked against the expansion of women's programmes. By relying on out-dated medical and cultural ideologies, the international governing bodies denied women the right to decide what they should do with their own bodies. While it is recognised that the federations relied on patriarchal theories¹⁴ to limit women's opportunities, one must accept that there was genuine anxiety about the effect that athletics could have on women. This was particularly true in the early

¹⁴ Patriarchal ideology has been defined as 'a system organised in ways that accord privilege to men as a group and allow them to have systematic coercive power over women. To legitimize domination, the dominant male culture constructs ideologies that define subordinate groups as inferior'. See D. M. Costa and S. R. Guthrie, 'Feminist Perspectives', in D. Costa and S. Guthrie (eds) *Women and Sport*, p. 240.

years that women were involved. The WAAA and the athletes themselves had no reason to disbelieve what doctors told them. They had no wish to put their long-term health at risk or harm their reproductive capacity. The medical establishment was held in very high esteem and it was not until the first generations of athletes had proved that the sport was a safe activity for women that questions began to be asked of the traditional arguments. Consequently, the WAAA was cautious in the early years and stressed its protective role.

The effect of domestic ideology also needs to be established when considering how women's opportunities were limited by medical fears. Particularly during the years immediately after the First and Second World Wars, when concern to produce healthy children was at a premium, women were trying to increase their athletic opportunities against a background of political and social pressure on them to remain in traditional roles. The emphasis was clearly placed on their responsibilities as wives and mothers, whose duty was the care of children and moral guardianship. The view that women should be involved in physical exercise in order to produce healthy children, rather than for their own enjoyment, was as apparent in the inter-war years as it had been when Swedish gymnastics was advocated before 1914. The need for a healthy and strong nation contributed to an overwhelming emphasis being placed on women's biological role. Anything that was seen to conflict with their domestic roles, challenge the patriarchal structure of the family, and have the potential to influence women not to have children was frowned upon. Domestic ideology, with its emphasis on the need for women to remain traditionally feminine, undoubtedly worked against the popularity of physical sports such as athletics. However, it should be remembered that, despite all the propaganda, the average family size continued to fall. Similarly, while the medical propaganda continued to warn of the dangers of women competing, the numbers of female athletes continued to rise. This does not suggest that official policy was always reflected in the actions of the public. It would be wrong to assume that because an ideology was supported by those in decision-making positions that it prevented women from participating in new activities.

While acknowledging that there was genuine concern about health risks to women athletes, it can be concluded that the slow rate of change was mainly due to old-fashioned prejudice. Long after the medical myths had been undermined, it was still being written that sport was harmful to women and should be avoided. Even those who supported their participation emphasised the need for less demanding programmes and called for restrictions on the number of competitive events. It was no coincidence that English women were able to explore their potential in a wider range of events in domestic competitions. The first generations of female athletes proved that women could perform safely in athletics, and began to weaken male hegemony. While not wanting to suggest that women were gaining sporting equality, the balance of power did alter enough to allow new events to be incorporated into race programmes. The WAAA, although not entirely female, was run by women. While they were largely middle-class and relatively conservative in their views, through the association they challenged the patriarchal assumptions of the international governing bodies. The WAAA monitored its athletes in order to find out if any harm resulted from training and competition and, once it was satisfied it did not, regularly fought alongside the USSR for increased opportunities and official recognition of more women's events. In contrast, the IAAF and IOC simply rejected the idea of an expanded women's programme on the basis of outdated medical arguments.

The IOC provides one of the clearest examples of patriarchal ideologies determining women's opportunities. It was argued in the fifties that the Olympic programme could not be expanded, not because women were unsuited to particular events, but simply because there was no room in the programme for more events. Omitting any male event or team competition was not deemed a viable option. In their desire to reduce the programme, women's athletics was threatened with exclusion. Change had occurred, however, since the twenties and thirties and, while male hegemony still existed, women's athletics had gained support. Evidence of male support was now apparent within the IAAF. By threatening to withdraw male athletes, it assured a place for the women's side of the sport.

Patriarchal ideologies have also been evident in the press responses to women's athletics. One of the ways that such views are expressed has been the trivialising of women's achievements. This usually occurs if they challenge male superiority and perform to a higher standard than is felt to be natural behaviour for women. As female athletes began to register performances previously considered to be impossible and, perhaps more importantly, began to better those of male club athletes, doubt over the sexuality of successful sportswomen became a common feature in the press. It was as true in 1960, as it had been in the twenties that if athletes did not appear attractive in the eyes of those watching, particularly the male press, then they risked being ridiculed, their biological sex questioned and the whole sport threatened. The continued emphasis on the need for sportswomen to remain within a narrow definition of femininity is of course a very effective way to maintain male hegemony. Homophobia in sport is intricately linked to this and, together, they are a powerful way to control women's performances. The importance that female athletes placed on remaining feminine reveals just how powerful the ideology of femininity was. As Lenskyj has noted, it is 'more than simply an aesthetic; it is the concrete manifestation of women's subordinate status'.¹⁵ The moderate training plans that women followed, particularly in the early years, helped to maintain the accepted image of feminine fragility and poor athletic performance.

Despite this, women's athletics benefited significantly from the press coverage it received. It is important to emphasise the amount of positive newspaper coverage that the press gave to women's athletics. Apart from the initial reluctance to support their activities by the Athletic News, and the negative comments after the 1928 Olympic 800 metres, the majority of reports were encouraging and full of praise for the women's achievements. Those people who did not watch women's athletics gained their knowledge of the sport through coverage in the newspapers. Positive coverage was vital if public support was to be maintained or increased. It was certainly not the

¹⁵ H. Lenskyj, Out of Bounds. Women, Sport and Sexuality (Toronto, 1986), p. 13.

case that the press was opposed to women's track and field and although the amount of space allocated did decline after the first few years, women were always given considerable support. Indeed, as it has been argued in this thesis, the press may have used language and photographs that maintained patriarchal assumptions but it was supportive. By showing that female athletes remained feminine, the press undermined opposition that the sport harmed women.

Nationalism was also evident in the way the press covered women's athletics. Reports often concentrated on how the domestic athletes were ranked in international terms. In the early years in particular, the involvement of English women was justified by the prestige that they brought to the country. Nationalism was evident in women's athletic meetings from the start of international competition. It does not appear that the FSFI or the WAAA saw this as a negative aspect of sport, although American educationalists argued it was evidence of the corruption in men's sport. They did not wish to see it replicated in women's track and field and this was one reason why they encouraged non-competitive activities. Nationalism and international sport have always been closely related and it was perhaps inevitable that nationalism would be part of women's athletics as it developed after the First World War. As has been discussed in the research, this was a time when individual countries were attempting to build up prestige. The fact that English women were so successful in international competition, helped to increase the positive coverage given to women's athletics and encouraged support for their participation.

In Class Sport and Social Development, Richard Gruneau has claimed that individuals are able to make their own history but that they do so within certain restrictions.¹⁶ It can be argued that the history of women's athletics provides an example of this. Women were active in creating their own sporting opportunities but

¹⁶ R. Gruneau, (Amherst, 1983). This is cited by S. Birrell and N. Theberge, 'Feminist Resistance and Transformation in Sport', in D. Costa and S. Guthrie, Women and Sport, p. 362. It should be noted that Karl Marx made this point first.

were clearly limited by existing gender relations. Many of the women questioned in the course of this research explained their lack of anger about the limited race programmes, by simply saying that they accepted the situation. Mary Markey, who competed in the thirties, declared that an athlete today could not understand what it had been like then; that was just the way things were and they had no reason to think they could be otherwise. Women stopped work, concentrated on their families and had shorter athletic careers. Women's self-image is shaped by the dominant beliefs of the society that they are brought up in, which helps to maintain the status quo. This, as Hargreaves has pointed out, is how hegemony maintains its control. The status quo is accepted as natural and it is not considered that there might be an alternative.¹⁷

It may appear that many colluded in the maintenance of a male hegemony and accepted the limited freedom they had. Yet while the women interviewed all denied that they were feminist in the sense that they wished to radically change women's lives, they were actively involved in challenging the existing athletic constraints. Although they might have felt that fewer opportunities were inevitable, the early female athletes clearly did reject some of the cultural constraints and society's view that athletics was unsuitable for them. This work illustrates that in track and field, women have consistently challenged the status quo of male exclusivity. The history of English women's athletics provides an example of how the dominant group is unable to exercise complete control. Consequently, there is always a shifting of the balance of power, albeit gradual and slow. The struggles of Madame Milliat and those who followed her allowed future female athletes to fight successfully for improved status.

Susan Cahn's work on American women's sport provides many comparisons with the findings of this research. As well as finding synonymous comments in the press about the need for sportswomen to remain feminine, there are striking similarities between the comments made by the women she interviewed with those who were contacted for this research. Cahn mentions several women who participated in baseball and basketball in the period concurrent with this work. Like track and field, these

¹⁷ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 22.

sports were traditionally considered to be unsuitable for women and provide an interesting comparison. Like the English female athletes, their main recollection was the enjoyment they got from participating, the sense of freedom and independence, and the opportunities for travel that sport gave them. Cahn argues that although the American women, like their English sporting counterparts, did not make political statements about gender inequality, they were aware of the cultural restrictions on their participation. The need to remain feminine was just as important for them. Nevertheless, Cahn found that while 'the masculine stigma sometimes hurt, discouraged or constrained them', women continued to be involved in a range of sports. They did not sit passively by but, helped by supportive families or coaches, they enthusiastically became involved in new sporting opportunities.¹⁸

In comparison, the English women athletes made it clear that they were happy to remain feminine but, equally, they enjoyed the new sporting opportunities and rejected notions that athletics was an unsuitable sport. While they did not see themselves as inferior, and were always keen to take up new opportunities, they did not express a desire to restructure the athletic hierarchy. Any public acceptance that this was needed came much later. Both the American and English sportswomen justified their involvement by emphasising their own femininity. In both cases, women declared that their team-mates were a positive advertisement for women's sports and, while there were cases of 'masculine' women who they did not approve of, they did not personally train with any.¹⁹ The experiences of English women athletes were not unique and, although a more detailed comparative study would need to be carried out before firm conclusions could be made, it does suggest that their attitudes could be reflected in a variety of women's sports. Regardless of what sport they participated in,

¹⁸ S. K. Cahn, Coming On Strong. Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport (1994), pp. 208 and 232-234.

¹⁹ S. Cahn, Coming on Strong, pp. 237-238.

the women, as Cahn has said, may not have been able to alter decisions of the male-dominated governing bodies, but they

were not powerless to effect changes in their own minds and immediate surroundings. As they played, women athletes developed a kind of double conscious; while comprehending the cultural interdiction “mannish” athletic women, they drew on their shared experience as female athletes to generate an expansive definition of womanhood that eliminated, or at least eased, the dissonance between athleticism and femininity.²⁰

The history of English women’s athletics presents several contradictions. On the one hand, the women involved gained tremendous satisfaction, had a lot of fun and made lasting friendships. A few travelled the world and experienced far greater freedom than the majority of women were allowed in these years. They gained confidence and helped to destroy myths about the danger of sport for the female body. Some were responsible for introducing other females to the world of athletics and enabling them to explore their physical potential. It is possible to argue, therefore, that the involvement of women in athletics provided individuals with many positive experiences. It is important that when one assesses the development of women’s sport and particularly the constraints that faced them, that the liberating aspects of sport are not forgotten. The enjoyment that women experienced during their time as athletes was the one theme continually emphasised by the women interviewed.

The history of women’s athletics provides just one example of sport as a contested arena. In the early years, when women’s international athletics was governed by the FSFI, the battle was to gain improved status and respect for both athletes and the federation itself. Once women’s athletics had assimilated into the existing male associations, the women had to struggle for increased competitive opportunities as

²⁰ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, pp. 208-209.

well as better recognition. Central to this on-going struggle, which continues in the present sporting world, is the battle to get women into decision-making positions. It is unlikely that women will gain equality until more women are able to decide their own sporting future.

The creation of a British Athletic Federation in 1991 was hailed as a victory for progress by both male and female athletes. The age difference between those administering and those competing was growing ever wider. Marea Hartman was criticised for remaining in office too long, and trying to maintain the independence of women's athletics in the face of increased demand for one association. John Rodda has concluded that 'certainly the development of women's sport in track and field suffered in Britain from this insularity, and the struggle of the seventies and eighties became wearing.'²¹ The history of the years between 1921 and 1960, however, does not support the argument that independence damaged women's athletics. There were few disputes between athletes and administrators, and little evidence that those involved wished the AAA to take over the women's organisation. As the men began to receive more coverage, sponsorship and consequently more money, there was an increased feeling among female athletes that more joint meetings and, especially, joint WAAA and AAA Championships would serve them better. However, there were few criticisms of the women's association itself. Support for the British Athletic Federation was a far more recent development. Women's athletics was ably administered by the WAAA who clearly felt that they had their athletes' best interests in mind at all times. It is therefore interesting to note that since the creation of the British Athletic Federation, few women have secured places in the sports administration or coaching structure. It would appear that the fears of the pioneering women have been realised. Now that women are governed by the same organisation as men, they have lost control of their sport and have a diminished voice.

²¹ 'Wisdom on the track', The Guardian, 31 Aug. 1994.

The achievements of women athletes in this period made subsequent developments possible, and the role of the individuals included in this work should be recognised for the importance that they had. While the number of anonymous enthusiasts can never be fully realised, this research would be incomplete without a final mention of Marea Hartman. As recently as September 1996, she was described as 'arguably the most influential pioneer of women's athletics in the world'. Although both men and women helped to establish the sport in the face of medical fears and aesthetic expectations, Hartman fought consistently throughout the fifties and sixties for improved opportunities at both national and international level. The importance of the individuals involved in local clubs and committees, who supported the work of the WAAA, should also not be underestimated. They provided hours of free coaching and encouragement and undoubtedly enabled the sport to develop as impressively as it did.

APPENDICES

No

15

1923.

AFFILIATION.

Bichford Harvers. Club

Rules

District Committee

Southern Committee

General Committee

Decision

Club Notified

Women's Amateur Athletic Association. 90, Tottenham Road, London, E.C. 2.
Telephone: 5000. Muffin 6100. ADVANCEMENT.

PARTICULARS RELATING TO AFFILIATION.

The affiliation fee is dependent on the number of members of the Club, as follows:-

	Votes.	Subscription.
Not exceeding 100	2	£0 10 6.
Over 100 but not exceeding 200	3	£1 1 0.
Over 200...	4	£2 2 0.

Associations of two and not more than ten Clubs pay a subscription of 10/6 with one vote.

Associations of eleven or more Clubs pay a Subscription of £1 1 0 with two votes.

Military Athletic Clubs are admitted to Membership at a minimum fee of 10s. 6d., irrespective of the number of their Members.

School Athletic Clubs are admitted to Membership without payment of subscription or affiliation fee, but are not entitled to votes.

Subscriptions are due on the 1st. January in each year, and Clubs whose Subscriptions are unpaid on the 30th. June are liable to be struck off the Roll of Membership of the Association.

Clubs before they can be affiliated to the A.A.A. must incorporate in their Rules the A.A.A. definition of an Amateur as follows:-

"An Amateur is one who has never competed for a money prize or monetary consideration, or for any declared wager or staked bet; who has never engaged in, assisted in, or taught any athletic exercise as a means of pecuniary gain; and who has never taken part in any competition with anyone who is not an Amateur."

The Association Black Book Rule must also be incorporated; this is as follows:-

RULE XXV.

(a) All Clubs affiliated to the A.A.A. shall have the following rule incorporated into their Rules, viz.: "That the Committee shall have power to expel any member whose subscription is six months in arrear, provided a month's notice in writing shall have been sent to such member by a registered letter, addressed to his last known address, informing him of the proposed action of the Committee."

(b) The name and address of any person so expelled from a Club in the Black Book shall be sent to the Secretary of the A.A.A. and of any person so expelled from a Club to the Southern or Midland District Secretary of the A.A.A. and to the A.A.A. respectively, and shall be entered by each of such officers in a book (to be called the Black Book) kept for that purpose. Every person whose name has been so entered in a Black Book shall be suspended from competing at a meeting held under A.A.A. laws until the liability causing his said expulsion, which shall not exceed one year's subscription, shall have been discharged."

N.B.—Club Secretaries sending up a name for entry in a Black Book must send with each name the Post Office Receipt for the registered letter sent to such person, or the name will not be inserted.

The Association undertakes to enforce its rules on all competitors at meetings held by affiliated Clubs.

The Sports of a Club can be registered on receipt of affiliation fee, pending its affiliation.

Each affiliated Club is liable (if called upon) to pay to the expenses of the Association a sum proportionate to the number of its representatives at the General Meetings of the Association. Such sum to be assessed by the General Committee, and not to exceed £2 for each representative.

The Hon. Secretary will be pleased to give any further information or to assist with Club Rules.

Form of application is annexed hereto.

N.B.—The Terms and Rules for competitors may be obtained at 1/- per copy (by post 1/4) and 1/- per dozen and official Rules at 1/- per copy.

Womens AMATEUR ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

To the Hon. Sec^W A.A.A., Major W.B. Marchant, Polytechnic Rega
 I beg to make application on behalf of the Birchfield Harriers Club.
 for affiliation to the A.A.A.

I enclose Entrance Fee = 10 ^{£.} 6 ^{s.} and a copy of the Rules of the Club.

Headquarters of Club (if any).	The Albion Hotel Edmund St. Birmingham
Course or Ground used for runs, &c.	Post Office Grounds Pershore Rd Bham
Address to which all communications should be sent.	W.W. Alexander 176 Gooch St Bham
Address of Treasurer.	F.W. Reay 106 Midland Rd, Kings Norton
Date of formation of Club.	1876
Number of Active Members and amount of their Subscription.	Ladies Section (20) - 1/- Harriers Section (Male) 700 - 4/-
Number of Honorary Members and amount of their Subscription.	50 - 5/-
Number of Athletic Meetings or runs held last year.	Numerous.
Number of Open Races held by the Club last year.	do.
Other Associations to which Club is affiliated.	M.C.A.A.A.; N.C.U, M.C.A.C.C.C.A. Amateur Boxing Assoc.

WE AGREE TO ABIDE BY THE RULES AND LAWS OF THE ASSOCIATION.

Secretary's Signature W.W. Alexander

Address 176 Gooch St, Bham

Date Jan 29/23

N.B.—Clubs before they can be affiliated must incorporate in their Rules the A.A.A. definition of an Amateur and the Associations Black Book Rule (RULE XXV) see particulars relating to affiliation printed overleaf and also a copy of the Rules of the Club MUST accompany the application for affiliation.

WOMEN'S AMATEUR ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION.

Joint Hon. Secretaries { Major W. B. MARCHANT, Polytechnic, Regent Street, W.1.
Mrs. S. C. ELLIOTT-LYNN,

Hon. Treasurer—Mr. R. CHURCHILL, 28, Alexander Street, Bayswater, W.2

Please reply to.....

12th August, 1922. 192

International Sports - Paris August 20th.

Dear Madam,

I have much pleasure in informing you that you have been selected to represent Great Britain at the above. Kindly let me have two unmounted photos of yourself 2 x 3" by return for your passport. *if you haven't a passport already*

The team will leave for Paris by the 11 a.m. train from Victoria on Friday morning, August 18th in charge of Mrs. Goold. Team will meet at station at 10.15. Mrs. Goold will wear a white handkerchief round her arm. Major Marchant, Mrs Elliott-Lynn and Miss Buchenagh will meet the train on arrival. Return Sunday night August 20th.

Will you please provide yourself with closefitting black knickerbockers reaching to not more than 4" from ground when kneeling, a loose white tunic of stout material belted, with elbow sleeves, reaching to 10-12" below waist. The use of stockings is optional, but most of the team will compete without them. It is advisable to bring two pairs running pumps and a warm coat.

If a headband or covering is necessary, black is to be worn.

I beg to remain,
Yours faithfully,

Under Clerk, Victoria Station SER

S. C. Elliott-Lynn
Joint Hon. Sec.

(Appendix 3)

Respondents

Bartlett, Mary (née French)

Mary competed for Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section throughout her career. She did, however, found West Bromwich Harriers Ladies' Section and trained over cross country with them during the inter-war years. Mary was the first person to be interviewed for this research and provided probably the best response. Mary joined Birchfield in October 1931 and was a member of their cross country team that won the National Championship several times. In 1932, she represented England against France in an international cross country. After the war she ran against Scotland. She met her husband while training at Birchfield and they later had three sons, proving wrong the many people who thought she would be unable to have children after running regularly. Despite running a Public House with her husband, she began competing again in 1946 and continued until 1952, after which she served on the MCWAAA committee. Mary also sat on the WAAA committee as vice-president and helped to form the Cross Country and Road Walking Association. Two of her sons have competed in athletics, as does her granddaughter. She is still interested in the sport and her only regret is that she was born too early to compete over the longer distances on the track.

Blaine, Norma

Norma remains very much an active member of Birchfield Harriers, the club that she competed for in the fifties, primarily as a walker. While describing herself as a team member rather a star athlete, she has played a major part in the development of both

Midland women's athletics and the sport on a national level. Norma is a life-vice president of Birchfield and is currently on the Executive Management Board of the British Athletic Federation. Apart from Mary Peters, who had just been voted in as president, she is the only woman on the Executive. In addition, Norma is on the AAA of England General Committee. Norma is one of the thousands of volunteers who have given hours of unpaid work to the sport, and she can be found at local and national competitions most weekends throughout the year.

Charles, Diane (née Leather)

Diane ran over the mile and half-mile in the fifties and was the number one female athlete in these events for most of this time. She initially represented Birchfield Harries. After moving to London to get more competition, she joined London Olympiads Athletic Club. She set world records over the mile and 1500 metres and was the first woman to run a sub-five minute mile. She was denied the opportunity to compete in several major championships and, when the 800 metres was introduced into the Olympics in 1960, she was no longer at her best. She had won, however, silver medals at both the 1954 and 1958 European Championships. Diane worked as a micro-analyst while she competed. She married in 1960 and retired from competition. She remained involved as an official, but in recent years moved to Devon and is no longer involved.

Court, Audrey (née Brown)

Audrey is the sister of Godfrey Brown, who won a silver medal in the individual 400 metres and a gold in the 4x400 metres relay at the 1936 Olympic Games. However, it is a little known fact that he had a sister at the same Games who ran in the 100 metres

and 4x100 metres relay. In the latter, she won a silver medal. Audrey competed for Birmingham University and Birchfield Harriers during the thirties and still lives in the Birmingham area. She competed in the first women's international student games in 1933, and in the 1935 Budapest student games. She also participated in the 1936 Olympic Games and the 1938 European Women's Championships in Vienna. She stopped competing because of the war, although she remained involved in athletics at Rowntrees, as the company established a summer athletics club for female employees. Audrey was also a member of the MCWAAA and Birchfield committees and remains in contact with Birchfield.

Hall, Phyllis

Phyllis was the oldest respondent approached and, although not in good health, she was happy to be interviewed. Phyllis ran for Birmingham University where she was awarded a teacher training certificate. She was also a member of Birchfield Harriers. She was one of the first women to compete over the half-mile and the mile on the track, and certainly over the 1,000 metres. It was over the latter distance that she ran in the First Women's Olympics in Paris in 1922, finishing third. Phyllis was only involved for about four years, as once she began working running took second place. However, she played a crucial part in the history of women's athletics as she was jointly responsible for founding the MCWAAA in 1925. F.A.M. Webster's history wrongly states that Hilda Hatt was placed third in the Paris 1,000 metres, a mistake that was not appreciated by her family! It has been a pleasure to correct this mistake. Sadly, Phyllis died a few months after she was interviewed.

Hartman, Marea

Marea has been seen as the personification of the WAAA and she was certainly more than just a figure head. Marea competed in the thirties as a sprinter for Spartan LAC and Surrey County. After the war she became an administrator for her club and county and, in 1950, took over the position of treasurer of the WAAA. She subsequently became secretary, and then president, while working at Bowaters Ltd. She remained president until her death in 1994. Marea was a team manager at the Melbourne Olympic Games of 1956 and was still travelling with teams, although not as team manager, when this research was initiated. Marea played a vital role in expanding the events available for women athletes while always emphasising that they should remain 'feminine' and 'graceful'. In addition to the WAAA, she sat on the IAAF Women's Commission and was honorary treasurer of the Council of Physical Recreation from 1984 until she died. Marea provided unlimited access to the WAAA files and was very keen that the history of women's athletics should be recorded.

Haywood, Winnie

A member of Birchfield Harriers, Winnie is still involved in women's athletics today as a field event judge, despite being in her mid-eighties. Winnie was a secretary. She began sprinting when she was nineteen after attending a social dance at the club. Before taking up athletics she played hockey and, as she did not participate in cross country, she continued to play during the winter months. After she stopped competing, she sat on the Birchfield and MCWAAA committees and represented the Midlands at WAAA committee meetings. She initially judged at cross country races and road walking but is just involved in summer meetings now.

Markey, Mary (née Rossi)

Mary represented the Coventry Godiva Harriers Ladies Section during the thirties. She was, not surprisingly, very indignant that present club officials were unaware that the Section had existed prior to the war. Race results in the athletics press had proved this was incorrect and Mary also had the medals and memories! In addition to competing for the club, she ran in Civil Service track and cross country championships as she worked for the Post Office. Mary's husband was supportive but she gave up in the late thirties once she had children, as she no longer had the time or energy to devote to training. Her introduction to the sport was via the cycling club, which met at the same venue as the athletics club. She was already a cyclist but wanted to experience a different sport. Despite her mother's opposition and lack of family encouragement, Mary subsequently represented England against France in the same cross country match as Mary Bartlett.

Randle, Beryl

Beryl competed with great success over the road and track as a walker, breaking the British record four times for the mile track walk during 1954. She competed first for Birmingham Atlanta and later Birchfield. She represented England in the first international road walk in 1959. After retiring from competition she lost touch with the sport, but was persuaded by Mrs Nelson-Neal to begin coaching after her husband died. She also sat on club committees and represented the Midlands on the WAAA's committee. She is still involved in the National Management Walking Committee and devotes hours of time to the sport.

Searle, Vera (née Palmer)

Vera only competed for about four years in the early twenties, having to retire when she married. However, she was an Executive Member of the WAAA from 1923 and was great friends with Marea Hartman. She competed for Middlesex Ladies Athletic Club and for her county. In 1923, she represented England in the sprints and set National records over 200 and 400 yards. Vera, while acknowledging the initial help of the men, was adamant that a separate organisation was necessary to safeguard the wishes of women athletes. She remained a member of the WAAA until the British Athletic Federation was established in 1991. Vera came from a comfortable background and after she lost her husband at a relatively young age was able to devote a lot of time, energy and probably money to developing women's athletics.

Smith, Betty (née Loakes)

Betty competed for Kettering Town Harriers. She joined in 1949 aged sixteen, running in the 100 and 220 yards. She later turned to 400 and 800 yards and represented England over 800 metres in 1954 against France. She also competed against the Russian teams. In 1958, she represented great Britain in the European Championships at 800 metres. Except short breaks when she had her children, Betty has continued running until today and competes in the veterans cross county and track championships.

Walker, Norman

Norman was involved with Coventry Godiva, first as a middle distance athlete and then as a coach to the women's section when it re-formed after the war. He was involved in the founding of the Warwickshire Counties WAAA, and represented his

club at county and Midland committee meetings. In later years, he was chairman of the Ladies' Section and then president. He continued his involvement as he got older, organising Sunday morning sessions for athletes too young to compete for the club. Together with his wife Edna, who ran the club cafe after training and also sat on Warwickshire and club committees, he gave years of his life to the club. Norman still lives in Coventry although he retired from the club Executive in the early 1990s.

White, Roma (née Ashby)

Roma is a member of a very successful athletic family, and one that has had a long history of connections with Coventry Godiva. She competed over the half-mile, mile and 1500 metres in the fifties, and was also a National Cross Country Champion. After going to school at Barrs Hill in Coventry, she attended London University where she qualified as a doctor. She stopped competing when she got pregnant although she has continued to do some running to keep fit.

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National Senior Road Walk Championships, 1953

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Coventry Godiva General Committee Minutes

ii/ Copies of the following minutes were lent to the author by Wilf Morgan, official historian of Birchfield Harriers, Norma Blaine and Beryl Randle.

Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section Annual General Minutes

Birchfield Harriers Ladies Section Committee Minutes

MCWAAA Annual General Meeting Minutes

MCWAAA Committee Minutes

iii/ Copies of the following minutes were lent to the author by Dave Terry.

London Olympiades Athletic Club Annual General Minutes

London Olympiades Athletic Club Committee Minutes

Oral Interviews

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Blaine		Norma	12 May 1993
Court	(née Brown)	Audrey	29 June 1993
Disley	(née Cheeseman)	Sylvia	19 July 1995
Hall		Phyllis	22 February 1993
Hartman		Marea	13 May 1993
Haywood		Winnie	9 May 1994
Markey	(née Rossi)	Mary	10 March 1993
Randle		Beryl	28 March 1996
Searle	(née Palmer)	Vera	27 September 1993.
Searle	(née Palmer)	Vera	Interview by Joyce Sherlock 1987
Smith	(née Loakes)	Betty	17 February 1995
Smith		David	17 February 1995
Walker		Norman	10 May 1994

White	(née Ashby)	Roma	28 December 1994
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Charles	(née Leather)	Diane	15 July 1996
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Bartlett	(née French)	Mary	29 January 1993
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